



Faculty and Personnel Affairs Committee

Response to Charge S-2116-1

October 31, 2024

Title- Student Instructional Rating Survey (SIRS)

Description- Investigate the validity and accuracy of Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET), as well as the details of how the SIRS is implemented at Rutgers and make recommendations for its role in our new approach to the evaluation and improvement of teaching effectiveness. Prior senate charges are the base for this work.

Background

McMurtrie (2024) provides an overview of teaching evaluations in the Chronicle of Higher Education¹ drawing a connection between teaching and its impact on students' college success, especially for those with fewer educational resources (McMurtrie, 2024). Nonetheless, little training on teaching and guidelines on how to evaluate teaching is provided to faculty (McMurtrie, 2024). One looming issue remains: What is effective teaching, and how is it measured? Teaching is challenging to measure; however, many institutions employ evaluations, with rating scales. These evaluations collect quantitative data easily, at financially cost-effective means, and are often automated. McMurtrie (2024) describes a reluctance to shift evaluation processes because of the needed time and resources.

Despite some resistance, national movements and trends are working to improve teaching evaluations. For example, the Transforming Higher Education- Multidimensional Evaluation of Teaching (TEval) is a National Science Foundation (NSF) funded project involving the University of Massachusetts, Kansas University, and The University of Colorado Boulder in developing specific strategies and processes for effecting change as it relates to evaluations since 2019 (TEval, n.d.).

Before TEval and in 2017, a Rutgers University task force on evaluating teaching comprised of a total of 9 faculty members across the three campuses, and RBHS, led by Barbara Lee, who was the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs at the time, developed a comprehensive report with recommendations².

The report provided a background on the University's history of evaluation teaching, namely that before 1991 no formal or required processes were in place. In 1992, the newly

¹ https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-evaluations-are-broken-can-they-be-fixed?utm_source=lterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_8979449_nl_Daily-Briefing_date_20240208&cid=db&source=ams&sourceid=&sra=true

² <https://nbfcrutgers.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/Teaching%20Task%20Force%20Draft.pdf>.

established Teaching Excellence Center in New Brunswick created a survey, now known as the SIRS. According to the report, the survey was not intended to be the only measure of teaching. Though the Senate in 2002 and the New Brunswick Faculty Council in 2007 composed resolutions to fortify teaching evaluations, none of the specific recommendations were widely implemented.

The report re-addressed the issues with the evaluation of teaching. The recommendations were intended for all who teach. The task force made global suggestions such as creating a teaching evaluation council and having each school devise an evaluation plan with a systematic process. The report described systematic assessment as a summative (for personnel decisions) and formative assessment to improve teaching and course material delivery. The recommendations also encouraged attempts to combat bias and address ranking issues/differences. Regarding the survey, they recommended adding yes or no questions. The first related to the instructor's contribution to learning, and the second focused on the course content's contribution to your learning. Departments/Schools were urged to attend to response rates and support those who need to improve scores.

The task force outlined a new process for evaluation, naming and detailing additional elements. They suggested the inclusion of a teaching portfolio, a peer review of course/teaching material, and a classroom observation. They also suggested an establishment of frequency specific to tenure-track, non-tenure, and lecturers. Each school/department should devise methods of reviewing, and write departmental narratives that indicate if the instructor did or did not meet the standards. Finally, the task force recommended collaboration between CTAAR, now known as Office of Teaching Evaluation and Assessment Research (**OTEAR**). The report references teaching evaluation, in general, and documentation for promotion.

In 2018, the Rutgers New Brunswick Faculty Council (NBFC) provided a Report of the Teaching Conference on Evaluation of Teaching³. The document summarized a conference, which referenced the recommendations developed by the task force in 2017. The summary highlighted the forum's objection to the use of SIRS for rehiring, retention, promotion, or tenure, citing the biased nature of the results that disproportionately impact women and racially minoritized groups. Similarly, the group expressed resistance to using class observations for summative means and discouraged using this tool for personnel decisions. The report highlighted the strength of a teaching portfolio and recommended its inclusion in a promotion packet at the instructor's discretion. Finally, the report highlighted conference panelists' concerns with the short timeline, describing the implementation plan as "too rapid."

Concurrent with the report in 2018, the NBFC crafted a response to the Proposal to Improve Evaluation of Teaching at Rutgers University⁴. This response echoed avoiding SIRS for personnel decisions and recommends three changes. The first was the establishment of university-wide and department-specific teaching standards. The second was offering programs to help faculty improve teaching and achieve the established standards. The third recommendation was creating a system that evaluates teaching and skill. The written response expressed a commitment to the student experience and teaching excellence and an acknowledgment of the necessary allocation of resources to actualize the recommendations.

In 2021, the NBFC passed a resolution on Student Evaluation of Teaching⁵ calling for a redesign. More specifically, the resolution highlights the biased responses from the rating scale

³ <https://nbfc.rutgers.edu/documents/report-teaching-conference-evaluation-teaching>

⁴ <https://nbfc.rutgers.edu/documents/nbfc-response-proposal-improve-evaluation-teaching-rutgers-university>

⁵ <https://nbfc.rutgers.edu/documents/resolution-student-evaluation-teaching>

and calls for questions that will evoke feedback related to teaching effectiveness. This 2021 resolution also recommends discontinuing the use of SIRS for personnel decisions. Again, the NBFC passed a resolution in February 2023⁶ that underscored the challenges with student evaluations of teaching, specifically the biased results based on gender, ethnicity, color, and national origin. The resolution offered two guiding principles. The first is to avoid using a biased tool, even as part of a packet, for personnel decisions, and that OTEAR design and improve the survey by removing numerical ratings and including more open-ended questions and flexibility for instructors to include questions, among other suggestions.

Discussion and Considerations-

At the request of the FPAC Committee, OTEAR conducted extensive quantitative analyses in Summer 2024 focused on the factorial validity and internal reliability of the SIRS (reference Executive Summary attached). The analysis was based on a sample of 133,254 SIRS responses for 5151 instructors across Rutgers in Spring 2022, including 8343 tenure track, 26,665 tenure, 46,268 NTT, 31,353 lecturers (formerly PTLs), 10,557 TA/GA's, and 10,068 Other.

OTEAR also evaluated instructors' perceptions of the value of SIRS by sending email invitations in Spring 2023 to all faculty teaching that semester (N=5498) and assessed administrators' (department chairs, et al.) perceptions of the value of SIRS based on a survey and focus groups. Some conclusions:

- Faculty and administration highly value SIRS for formative uses such as improving their courses.
- In contrast, not as many see the SIRS results as helpful for summative processes (promotion, tenure, and advancement) and recognize its limitations
- Those instructors who do not find student feedback valuable cited several reasons, including a belief that students provided biased responses and concerns over low response rates
- OTEAR did not find evidence of gender or racial bias. However, the fact that filling out instructor's race was optional renders it impossible to make any definitive conclusions regarding the existence of racial bias.

OTEAR also analyzed current directions of some of our peer universities, which include:

- Adding a statement to the beginning of the survey to mitigate unconscious bias (Genetin et al., 2021⁷; Peterson et al., 2019⁸)
- Focusing on how to communicate the purpose of the survey and what is actionable feedback with training and videos (Signorini et al., 2020⁹).

⁶ <https://nbfc.rutgers.edu/documents/resolution-student-evaluation-teaching-sirs>.

⁷ Genetin, B., Chen, J., Kogan, V., & Kalish, A. (2021). Mitigating implicit bias in student evaluations: A randomized intervention. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 44(1), 110-128. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/aep.13217>

⁸ Peterson, D. A., Biederman, L. A., Andersen, D., Ditonto, T. M., & Roe, K. (2019). Mitigating gender bias in student evaluations of teaching. *PLoS One*, 14(5), e0216241. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.Pone.0216241>

⁹ Signorini, A., Abuan, M., Panakkal, G., & Dorantes, S. (2020). Students helping students provide valuable feedback on course evaluations. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 39(2), 75-105. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.17063888.0039.204>

- Redesigning end-of-course student surveys to improve the quality of student feedback (some Rutgers schools have done this as well)
- Strengthening holistic evaluation of teaching through peer review, portfolios, and other evidence (Dennin et al., 2017¹⁰)

FPAC noted that OTEAR currently makes the following extensive support and makes it widely available across Rutgers:

- Resources to support instructors in communicating about SIRS & providing feedback
<https://go.rutgers.edu/CommunicateSIRS>
- Workshops on interpreting SIRS, peer review observations, and teaching portfolios for faculty and administrators
<https://otear.rutgers.edu/workshops/>
- Consultations with schools regarding customizing their forms, piloting, and evaluation
<https://otear.rutgers.edu/sirs/sirs-forms/>

The FPAC had these remaining questions.

- Since many of the items are highly correlated, do we still need all the questions?
- What are best practices to maximize student response rates and guide students in providing useful feedback?
- How do the SIRS questions relate to observations and other behavioral measures?
- How do we establish standards for excellence in teaching and what are the criteria?
- Once established, how can the SIRS process help to promote, incentivize and reinforce excellent teaching standards and counteract instances where the minimum standards are not being met?
- How do we distinguish and address the validity and value of SIRS results considering different levels of courses, types of courses (e.g., humanities vs. science), response rates, etc.

Summary and Synthesis

1. FPAC acknowledges the substantial investment of time and effort at Rutgers and at OTEAR focused on these issues, as well as the extensive bodies of external research literature documenting potential biases.
2. FPAC is impressed with efforts of peer organizations to rethink the best and most appropriate uses of student surveys.
3. It appears Rutgers University has in OTEAR a highly committed and well qualified organization to lead and implement the SIRS process.

¹⁰ Dennin, M., Schultz, Z. D., Feig, A., Finkelstein, N., Greenhoot, A. F., Hildreth, M., Leibovich, A. K., Martin, J. D., Moldwin, M. B., O'Dowd, D. K., Posey, L. A., Smith, T. L., & Miller, E. R. (2017). Aligning Practice to Policies: Changing the Culture to Recognize and Reward Teaching at Research Universities. *CBE life sciences education*, 16(4), es5. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.17-02-0032>

Recommendations- Be it resolved, the University Senate recommends that:

1. The university revisits and implements recommendations from prior reports and resolutions. Such as:
 - a. Establish teaching standards to define the criteria for excellence in teaching
 - b. Explore redesigning the SIRS to best support excellence in teaching
2. The university and individual schools and units avoid use of SIRS feedback as sole or primary measure of performance, but rather review "Teaching Portfolio" over multiple years.
3. The university reaffirm its commitment to teaching to regard it as important as research by ensuring that SIRS is used effectively and primarily for faculty development.
4. The university creates and makes widely available a comprehensive compilation of resources for faculty and teaching support.
5. The university consider organizing a conference on best practices in teaching evaluations, inviting other institutions to share their tools and processes.

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