The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Undergraduate Educational Policy and Curriculum Committee

**Minutes**

Thursday, February 28, 2019

Attending: Helena Dettmer (Chair); Jill Beckman; Andrew Forbes; Matthew Gilchrist; Kathryn Hall (staff); Anita Jung; Meena Khandelwal; Ana Rodríguez-Rodríguez; Tristan Schmidt

Absent: Rebekah Kowal; Jerald Moon; Shaun Vecera

1. The minutes from February 21, 2019, were approved as written.
2. Helena Dettmer, Chair, announced that UEPCC would not meet on March 14 or on March 21 because of Spring Break and related travel plans.
3. Kenneth Brown, Professor and Associate Dean of the Tippie College of Business and Chair of the ACE Online Faculty Evaluation Committee, updated UEPCC on the work to date of the ACE committee. One of the committee’s earliest decisions was that ACE should be used primarily for improving instruction and not for personnel decisions. One of the three subcommittees formed from the larger committee is looking into the “right” use of these evaluations. Clearly, it is important that student voices are heard, but those voices must be balanced with other ways of evaluating teaching since it is well documented by research that bias exists in student responses. Additionally, students are not trained to give expert, professional advice on teaching; still, their responses must be noted, especially when patterns of concerns become apparent. The committee is also looking at peer reviews of instruction as a means of evaluating teaching, and a second subcommittee has been formed to recommend best practices. A third subcommittee has been created to write new ACE questions that are clear, concise, and that capture key classroom concerns across campus. A survey to DEOs shows there is inconstancy in how evaluations are read or used, and this is one area of concern, especially when the rate of return on the evaluations is very low. In order to address low return rates of evaluations, best practices must be used; students will fill out the forms if time is made in class to do so. Using the middle of the period is best so students do not leave in a hurry but give more thoughtful answers. The proposed questions to date were shown to student-focus groups, with these groups suggesting a maximum of 10 questions. The students also had comments about two of the questions, suggesting they were unclear. The committee therefore is considering recommending a maximum of ten core questions, to be used regardless of course type, with the instructor gathering other information as needed through different instruments, such as midterm surveys or written responses to particular questions about course logistics or content. Discussion then focused on the fact that not all instructors design their own courses and that it might not be fair for students to evaluate course design, particularly when TAs are teaching a course based on a course structured by the department, for example. Additionally, UEPCC members noted that the draft version of two of the ACE questions on respect and fairness were problematic since these terms are highly subjective. Ken Brown reminded the group that whatever questions are used, bias will appear in the answers given. Helping those people “upstream” to recognize this bias is key to solving the problem, with bias mitigated by training and the use of additional tools that can help give a wider perspective of teaching and the instructor’s abilities. The committee might recommend that an instructor gives optional midterm evaluations, for example, that will show feedback is taken seriously. UEPCC also wondered if the proposed questions would be piloted before implementation. The ACE committee plans to pitch the questions to various student and faculty groups; there may not be time to do a large pilot, but a smaller one might be feasible. The group also discussed the first or guiding principles of the ACE committee. Ken Brown responded that one of the most important principles agreed upon by the committee was that one source of data would not result in changes in teaching or in fair evaluations. The teaching evaluations have problems, but they do give a voice to students, which is important, and teaching evaluations by students thus should continue. However, the forms can be shortened to lessen the student burden and if accompanied by peer reviews will be more helpful for improving instruction. Still, training will be needed in both for these instruments to be effective.
4. CLAS undergraduates Claire Miller, Kaydee Ecker, and Robert Tubbs met with the committee to discuss their concerns with classroom distractions. When students use their computers during class to watch YouTube or to shop, for example, this creates an enormous number of visual distractions, making it very difficult for other students in the vicinity to concentrate. It can be difficult to interrupt the instructor with the issue during class or to move, which could cause even greater distractions. Students even in the front rows use their computers in this fashion and that is especially discouraging. Students wanting to concentrate do not have the ability or energy to deal with this in each class, every day, without some kind of help to reinforce this message and to ensure that the students have this right to a respectful learning space. Students with disabilities can be especially distracted by noise, lights, and the flashing or constantly changing colors as seen on video games, which students often play during class, with these almost impossible to tune out. The use of technology not related to the course content can also discourage the instructor and can devalue the educational experience for all involved. A policy should be created by CLAS to limit these distractions and to help students learn professional behavior, teaching students an important life lesson about when to turn off their devices and how to concentrate, a skill needed in any career. Those who are not in the classroom to learn should not be allowed to harm the learning of those who are dedicated to this goal. The students then suggested a policy for classroom behavior, as follows:

All students or students taking classes offered by CLAS are required to be respectful of the classroom environment. Behaviors that negatively impact the learning of other students are not allowed. These include but are not limited to using electronic devices for non-academic purposes and to engaging in personal conversations during class. If you have difficulty learning because of these or other distractions, please notify your instructor.

UEPCC was very impressed with the students’ argument and thanked them for the detailed and informative presentation. The discussion will continue in UEPCC at a second meeting.

1. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Anita Jung  
Professor, Art and Art History   
Secretary for UEPCC