5 June 2002

To: Joseph J. Seneca
        University Vice President for Academic Affairs

From: Gary A. Gigliotti
        Monica A. Devanas

Re: University Senate Recommendations for "Best Practice in Assessment of Teaching"

        We have reviewed the "Report of the Senate Faculty Affairs and Personnel Committee on Charge S-0109, Best Practices in Assessment of Teaching." In response to your request, we will address the resolution's contents point by point.

Recommendation 1. Wording for student comments on reverse of form:
        We will have these words removed from the Student Instructional Rating Survey forms in future orders from National Computer Systems who print the forms for us. At present we have a stock of approximately 150,000 forms, which will be exhausted by the Spring 2003 term. We can fully implement this recommendation by Fall 2003.

Recommendation 2. Peer review and Mentoring:
        This recommendation applies directly to academic departments. We will offer workshops to interested departments in the design of mentoring and peer evaluation systems. As the resolution suggests we will prepare guidelines and procedures for this peer review and mentoring.

Recommendation 3. Teaching Portfolios:
        As we have been doing for the past eight years, Dr. Devanas will continue to offer workshops to schools, departments and faculty on the development and use of Teaching Portfolios. Cook College has already implemented the Teaching Portfolio for all of its faculty members. We will contact the other Deans in New Brunswick and discuss with them ways for their faculty to adhere to this recommendation from the Senate. We believe University-wide use of Teaching Portfolio to be the most effective and cost effective method of improving teaching we can follow. We enthusiastically support this recommendation.

Recommendation 4. Departmental storage of information:
        This resolution states that each department should keep on file *all of the information* on the Student Instructional Rating Survey forms for each instructor, for each section for each course for at least ten years. There are a number of ways to comply this recommendation. One is for the departments to store all the evaluation forms per instructor per course per term for ten years. For some departments this would be a massive task given the volume of forms used per term by some departments, i.e., psychology and math. Though the data from the forms is saved in the scanned data files and processed in the result sheets mounted on the web, it is the comments on the back of the form that create the problem. The simplest way to save the information contained in the comments is to save the forms themselves. Other alternatives include re-typing the comments from the forms into a computer file, or scanning the comments.
        The recommendation of the Senate clearly states that this is the department's responsibility. It is our belief though, that for many departments, it will be very difficult or impossible to comply. In the long run, a cost effective solution would be to find another way to record the student comments, rather than on paper, so that they can more easily stored.

Recommendation 5. Candidates for promotion should list SIRS ratings.
        The TEC has sent to each department head a complete list of SIRS ratings results per instructor per course per term since the inception of the system. We also send back with the scanned and processed forms a results sheet for each instructor for each course for each term. However, chairs and instructors routinely loose this information. This fact was a major motivation for putting the SIRS data on the web. Therefore we will put on the SIRS web site data from Fall 1995 to the present so that all of this information is available to those who need it. Since Summer 1996, we have surveyed the courses offered in summer in New Brunswick and Camden and Summer 2001. We have not been asked to post SIRS Summer results on the University's web site and have not done so. We have no plans to do so either.

Recommendation 6. Creation of a SIRS Database:

This recommendation says that any faculty member, chair or dean could send a query to a database, managed and maintained by the TEC and receive an immediate response. Here is an example: I make a request on-line to the SIRS Database for my score on Question 9 in all courses that I have taught over the past ten years. Immediately, a list of all of my scores for Question 9 is produced for every course I taught over the past ten years.

This recommendation is very significant for the structure of the Teaching Excellence Center. The creation of a database for each faculty member containing student course rating scores and summary statistics, available to each faculty member, department chair and dean, on request, is a monumental undertaking. To create a data structure to house the vast quantity of information in the SIRS system for all instructors is a considerable project all on its own. The maintenance and management of this database, especially the need to keep it up to date, is an enormous task too.

We suggest the following:

1.   By making available on the web, the results from all past SIRS starting Fall 1995 and constructing a search engine that can be used by faculty, chairs and deans, we can proxy the functions of a true database. So for example, I could search the SIRS website for all summary statistics sheets for "Gigliotti" and quickly find all of my results sheets from 1995 to the present. Then I could take from those sheets my scores from any of the ten questions that I was interested in.

2.   The TEC will begin to experiment with a new processing system that will in one step create from the data scanned from the forms, a database that can be queried as the Senate intends. When this is complete and thoroughly tested and piloted with selected departments, we can scale up to a University-wide database. Such an online database would replace the current system of creating summary statistics sheets per instructor per section of a course per term. Instead students, faculty, chairs and deans could simply query the database for any information they need. Such a plan will take approximately two years to implement.

Recommendation 7. Distribution of raw scores and summary statistics to each department:

The TEC has always distributed all summary statistics, term by term, to each department chair as mentioned above. We have also distributed the raw data as scanned from the forms to any department or dean who has requested it. Physics and Math have often requested this information and performed their own analyses of it. Cook College has done the same for many years.

To make the distribution of raw data and results summary sheets more efficient, given the large volume we have now been asked to distribute, we will create a password-protected web site for department heads to use to download their summary statistics and raw data each term. This site will be open to their use via a TEC-provided password for two weeks near the beginning of each term for accessing data from the previous semester. After that time the site will be closed, but data can be available by request to the TEC Director.

The TEC has created an Excel program that will allow departments to process their own raw data to make any of the comparisons suggested by the Senate or that the Department deems useful to them., e.g., normalized means. We will distribute this program in Fall 2002 to all departments and provide training and assistance in its use.

General Comments:

1.   The thrust of the Senate's recommendations are that departments should be much more responsible for the storage and analysis of the data from the SIRS, and that they should be much more active in peer discussions, mentoring and evaluation of teaching within their own units.

2.   The recommendations also imply that the TEC should be become much more sophisticated in its data processing and data management so that faculty, chairs and deans can get any information that they want at the click of a mouse. We will do our best to implement these recommendations.

3.   As long as comments are collected on the SIRS forms and sent to us, we are involved significantly in the movement of paper back and forth from departments to us across the University. It would be much more efficient to create a paper form or an online form that would keep the comments where they belong, in the hands of the instructor and the department. We are working on ideas to make this possible.

4.   We are concerned about the recommendation that each department store all of the information on its forms for ten years. Most departments will simply not be able to find space for the forms.. Some will re-type the comments, a major misuse of University resources in our opinion. Others may try to scan the comments to store them electronically., either as images or through character recognition software. The image files would require major storage capacity. The text files created through character recognition software would require lest space but the scanning would be very inaccurate due to idiosyncrasies of each individual's handwriting. If student comments are to be stored for ten years, it would be much wiser to find a way to collect them online rather than through the current paper-based system. The TEC will experiment with scanning comments this summer to get an idea of the costs and difficulties involved. We will also work on other methods of collecting comments. Any results from these experiments will not appear for at least a year, but it makes sense to investigate the possibilities now.