

Student Assessment of Instruction Evaluation Task Force
Recommendations of the Task Force
March 28, 2002

Charge

In September of 2001, the Student Assessment of Instruction (SAI) Evaluation Task Force was charged with conducting a thorough review of the SAI process. This review was to include:

- A review of the current SAI policy and procedures.
- Opportunities for faculty and administrators to offer input/feedback regarding the SAI policy/procedures.
- A review of similar policies/procedures from other institutions.
- A draft of recommendations for clarification/revision of the SAI policy/procedures at Ferris.
- Opportunities for faculty and administrators to offer input/feedback on the preliminary draft of recommendations.
- A set of final recommendations that would be forwarded to the Vice President for Academic Affairs by April 1, 2002.

Membership

Ed Cory	Professor, College of Education and Human Services
John Kane	Professor, College of Business
William Papo	Professor, College of Technology
Donna A. Smith	Professor, College of Arts and Sciences
David Nicol	Dean, College of Business
Kristen Salomonson	Assistant Dean, Enrollment Services
John Thorp	Department Head, Social Science
Laurie Chesley (chair)	Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs

Recommendations

As a result of its data collection and deliberations, the Task Force offers ten recommendations regarding the SAI process.

Recommendation #1 – Concerning Comparative Data

The Task Force believes that both faculty and evaluators would find it helpful to have comparative data on the SAI and, therefore, recommends that the following categories of results be supplied to faculty members and their evaluators:

1. the instructor's results

2. peers' results (the mean, median, and standard deviation on each question for those teaching the same course)
3. departmental results (the mean, median, and standard deviation on each question for those teaching in the same department)
4. university-wide results (the mean, median, and standard deviation on each question for all faculty at the university)

In addition, some controls should be introduced into the comparative data analysis, in particular, class size and motivation (SAI question 21), because both of these factors impact ratings. Accounting for the following class sizes (1-15; 16-30; and 31+) and for five levels of motivation as reported in question 21 would give 15 separate cohorts and improve interpretation of results. Data would be run in these cross-tabulations (specific breakdowns) only if the number were high enough to ensure reliable results.

Second, the scores should be reported as part of a normal distribution (bell curve), which will provide more useful information. Also included should be the mean, median, and standard deviation. The results would not be presented in graphic form, but data on central tendency (mean/median) and dispersion (SD) would be provided.

The Task Force further believes that having this comparative data will allow both faculty and evaluators to establish more reasonable expectations of faculty performance. In the absence of comparative results, individuals tend to create their own standards, and those can be unrealistic.

Comparative data such as that suggested above would be much more useful than the Grand Mean and should replace it.

Recommendation #2 – Concerning the Grand Mean

The Task Force recommends that the Grand Mean for the SAI no longer be calculated and published. Survey results clearly indicate that the prevailing opinion about the Grand Mean is that it is not important. Although evaluators found this figure less useful than did faculty, no one in either group indicated that it was “very important,” and only seven listed it as “somewhat important.”

Recommendation #3 – Concerning a New Data Field

The SAI form needs a data field for the instructor's name. When staff members receive summary sheets from Institutional Research, they have to write faculty members' names on them in order for them to be reviewed and filed.

Recommendation #4 – Concerning Use of SAI Results

The Task Force recommends that more measures be taken to ensure that SAI results are evaluated and used consistently across the University. If the University could do more to ensure the consistent and fair use of SAI results, three positive outcomes might occur.

- Debates about the instrument itself (its validity, its value compared to other instruments, the phrasing and inclusion of individual questions) might become less significant.
- Infrequent stories of improper use of SAI results might become even less frequent.
- Concern about who can see or keep students' written comments from the SAI might lessen.

To try to promote more consistency across campus, the Task Force recommends the following: 1) evaluator training specifically on the SAI; 2) faculty training on the SAI; and 3) less emphasis on the SAI in the Post-Tenure Review (PTR) process.

Evaluator training would include some basic instruction in how survey results can be legitimately interpreted, as well as discussion amongst evaluators that might result in greater shared understanding of the relative importance and magnitude of SAI results in evaluating faculty performance. Training on survey interpretation could be provided by Institutional Research staff on a regular basis to ensure everyone understands the process.

Faculty training would also include how survey results can be legitimately interpreted. Training or informational sessions could be led by Institutional Research staff and promoted by the Center for Teaching, Learning and Faculty Development.

Survey results indicate that there is a large disparity in the perception of what methods, other than the SAI, have been used to evaluate faculty performance. Evaluators were more likely to report using alternative methods (e.g. portfolio, classroom visit, etc.). The Task Force strongly recommends that the SAI not be the sole criterion by which teaching performance is evaluated. It should only be one of multiple measures. Having one evaluation mechanism is not sound practice when dealing with students and should not be when dealing with instructors. Additional mechanisms to evaluate teaching performance are necessary.

Finally, although the Task Force would hope that the preceding three recommendations would eliminate the need for such a procedure, it recommends that a due process procedure be put in place for faculty who believe that they have had their SAI results misused by evaluators.

Recommendation #5 – Concerning Instructions for SAI Facilitators

The Task Force recommends two improvements to the instructions delivered by SAI facilitators to students before they complete their surveys.

The instructions to students should be rewritten. They should be made very concise and ask students to reflect on their own roles in the teaching and learning process of the class

and how these might influence their evaluation of the instruction offered in the class. Then the students could be asked to consider each question carefully and in an unbiased manner. The student also could be asked to reflect on the effective learning environments he or she has experienced in the past before completing the survey. The student might finally be asked to consider his responsibility to his fellow students and to thoughtfully complete the survey.

The instructions should then go on to explain exactly how the SAI is used in faculty evaluation and how it is not used. The instructions should be clear that supervisors review the results with faculty in order to facilitate a discussion on improvement; however, they do not use the results punitively. Trends in student commentary are more closely noted than highly unique perceptions. Fairness—constructive criticism and, when appropriate, positive acknowledgement—should be encouraged, as it is more likely to be taken seriously than intemperate remarks, and as it is more likely to result in an improved learning experience for future students.

The Task Force further suggests that increased efforts be made to ensure a consistent approach and demeanor from the facilitators giving the SAI. Although there is currently a script for facilitators to read, who actually does the facilitation and the tone they take in so doing differs greatly. Student responses can be affected by differences in the demeanor of the facilitator and the perspective he or she takes on the SAI process. To improve the process in this regard, the Task Force proposes that faculty select their facilitators with care, with an eye to selecting a colleague who will read the instructions carefully and exude a tone of seriousness. The Task Force strongly recommends that faculty not select students to be facilitators.

Recommendation #6 – Concerning Student Input on the SAI Instrument and Process

In response to question #20 on the PTR/SAI survey—“What are the strengths and weaknesses of the SAI?”—a common faculty response is that it is given too often, that it is too long, and that students don’t take it seriously.

The Task Force feels that it would be informative to better understand what students think about the SAI. After all, they are, it could be argued, the ones most affected by the instrument. The time they spend upfront on completing the surveys is significant, and the impact they potentially might experience upon having an instructor change his or her instruction is also substantial.

What would be the outcome of having students evaluate the SAI? If we want students to take the instrument and instructor evaluation seriously, then it makes sense to understand how they approach the individual questions and the process in general.

In order to achieve this understanding, the Task Force recommends that Institutional Research develop and conduct student focus groups in which the participants go through the SAI process together and share their opinions about it. These focus groups would

ideally be held toward the end of this semester (Winter 2002) so that, if a task force is formed next academic year to review the SAI instrument itself (as we will propose in Recommendation #7), that group will have the students' responses to consider as part of their duties.

The Task Force also hopes that the focus groups can help to answer why the electronic form of the SAI has a poor completion rate.

Recommendation #7 – Concerning Review of the SAI Instrument

Finally, the Task Force recommends that the SAI instrument itself be reviewed soon (even next year) to determine if: a) it should be kept as the objective instrument for student evaluation of instruction for the Post-Tenure Review process; b) it should be revised to garner results that are more helpful to faculty in improving teaching and learning; or c) another instrument should be adopted.

Results of the PTR/SAI survey clearly show that evaluators find both the written and quantitative portions of the SAI more significant than do the faculty. Ideally, the University would have an evaluation instrument (again, preferably multiple measures of teaching effectiveness) that the majority of faculty would find helpful in improving teaching and learning.

When making its determinations, the group assigned to review the SAI should take into consideration not only the results of the PTR/SAI survey of Fall 2001, but also the findings from the student focus groups recommended above. The group also should conduct a scholarly review of current research on evaluation.

A final suggestion from the Task Force is that we need an instrument by which students are asked to comment on their own performance and motivation; the course itself; and then the professor. Currently, the SAI seems too much like a criticism of the instructor. Moreover, a common lament in the survey results is that, as it stands, the SAI has no relation to student learning or the achievement of course outcomes.

Recommendation #8 – Concerning “To the Student” Information on the SAI Form

The Task Force recommends a minor change to the SAI form to be made when the next order of SAI forms is placed. On the back page of the form is a statement “To the Student” that reads: “These comments are for instructional improvement only.” The Task Force proposes that the word “only” be removed because it could be interpreted as being misleading. It could give students the impression that the SAI is never used in an evaluative manner—and arguably some departments do use the instrument for non-tenured faculty in an evaluative manner. Also, arguably, there is an evaluative aspect to the Post-Tenure Review process, although its main purpose is to be a developmental exercise.

Recommendation #9 – Concerning the Frequency With Which the SAI Is Given

No one issue elicited as much debate within the Task Force as how often the SAI should be given.

Opinions of task force members ranged from administering the SAI as few times as possible to administering it in every class every semester. In between were the views that the current frequency (two classes each semester) should be maintained and that lowering the frequency to one class each semester or two classes per year would be preferable.

Information gathered in telephone interviews with officials at Grand Valley State University, Central Michigan University, and Michigan Tech University indicates that at those institutions an “every class, every semester” philosophy prevails.

The Task Force considered proposing a “schedule” for colleges to administer the SAI that might lessen the students’ presumed perception that they are constantly filling out yet another SAI form. Such a system might involve having several colleges scheduled for SAI’s during two weeks late in the semester; several other colleges scheduled for a different two weeks; and the rest of the colleges scheduled for yet a different two weeks. However, this system probably would not significantly lessen the perception by some faculty (and almost certainly some students) that SAI’s are too frequently given.

The Task Force finally decided to recommend the following plan as a way to simplify the SAI requirements for faculty and still provide adequate data about students’ assessment of instruction. The recommendation is to require faculty to administer the SAI in all of their classes in the last four semesters before they are scheduled to undergo the Post-Tenure Review process. In addition to providing a good data snapshot and to being simple, this pattern of administration would eliminate the possibility for and the perception of strategizing (by faculty or academic administrators) about which classes to select for evaluation in order to get desired results.

Whatever the final determination regarding the frequency with which the SAI is given, the Task Force did absolutely agree that “how often” it is given becomes a far less important question when everyone can come to consensus about how the results can fairly interpreted and reasonably used.

Recommendation #10 – Concerning an SAI for Online Courses

The Task Force believes that the University needs to develop an instrument designed specifically for evaluating online instruction. In many ways, the current SAI is inappropriate for such evaluation. The Task Force recommends that this issue be addressed by the same group we have proposed to review the SAI instrument itself (Recommendation #7).

Conclusion

The Task Force appreciates the opportunity to work on trying to improve the Student Assessment of Instruction process. We would be happy to meet with you to discuss our recommendations.

