APAS Overview of Preliminary Directions on Its Student Course Evaluations Charge

Background
In 2005, the Senate endorsed four purposes intended to guide the creation of a new online course evaluation system. An implementation committee worked to develop fifteen items aligning with these purposes, which were shared with the Senate the following year. In 2008, the CourseEvalUM system was introduced. Since then, changes have been made to the evaluation platform, but the Course Evaluation items have remained essentially the same (a USM-mandated item related to the value of required texts was added in 2017).

In January 2017, the Senate Executive Committee (SEC) received a proposal from the Executive Director of the Teaching & Learning Transformation Center (TLTC). The proposal identified several areas where the CourseEvalUM system could be improved and called for a comprehensive review of the existing approach to evaluating courses and instructors, one informed by recent scholarly literature and intended to revise the course evaluation items used. The Senate's Academic Procedures & Standards Committee (APAS) was charged with this review. An APAS subcommittee worked extensively on the charge, consulting with experts in the field of course and instructor assessment; researching current uses of CourseEvalUM results by administrators, faculty, and students; conducting peer institution research; and reviewing previous research on CourseEvalUM. APAS is currently considering the subcommittee's recommendations. After soliciting feedback from a range of stakeholders, it will revise and refine its final recommendations to the Senate.

Original Purposes
The Senate initially intended the course evaluations to address four purposes. They were to serve as: **Formative Evaluations** to provide diagnostic feedback to faculty for the improvement of teaching; **Summative Evaluations** to provide one measure of teaching effectiveness for use in APT and related reviews; **Informative Evaluations** that can help students select courses and instructors; and **Outcome Evaluations** to document student learning.

Current System
The subcommittee found that the current system is not able to adequately address two of its original purposes (Formative & Outcome). Given results from the current system are not available until after each semester is over, instructors are unable to make mid-semester adjustments. Further, many of the current items do not address specific practices and are not actionable. The current items are also ill-suited to measuring student learning, which is better addressed by learning outcomes assessments and other mechanisms.

The subcommittee found that many of the current items are inappropriate or open to bias. Some ask students about topics for which they are not the best source of information. The nature of the current items also make them more open to bias, particularly those that involve vague or subjective criteria. Additionally, the subcommittee found significant concern over the open-ended item, which can yield biased and even hateful comments. The subcommittee also found that the results have at times been overly emphasized in evaluating instructor performance, particularly for professional track (PTK) faculty.

Some of the current items are also redundant, a result of the instrument's original design. Because the "evaluations" can be considered a form of personnel record, the CourseEvalUM results are limited to specific audiences. Administrators can only see responses to eight of the items, students see the remaining eight, and instructors have access to all of them. This "firewall," which in its consultation with the Office of General Counsel the subcommittee found may no longer be necessary, has resulted in overlap between items, further limiting the range of elements they can cover. **Given the**

above, the subcommittee believes that the current items represent a missed opportunity to gather a wider range of information about instructors and courses.

Overview of Preliminary Directions

The subcommittee's recommendations are premised on a belief that University-wide data on student experiences serve a useful purpose and should be retained and improved. The subcommittee approached its work as an opportunity to reimagine the instrument in light of current best practices; narrow its purpose; and develop a tool that provides more and better information to administrators, instructors, and students. Its key recommendations include:

The "course evaluation" system should be renamed to better communicate that it gathers students' perceptions of courses and instructors. While results may be used to inform personnel evaluations, the survey results are not evaluations of instructor performance, a distinction that current terminology may blur. The "firewall" should be eliminated, resulting in more results being available to administrators and students (open-ended items would only be visible to administrators and instructors, given they can contain personally identifiable information and unaggregated, unit-level data). **Given the limited information these survey results can give, they should not be used as the sole basis for personnel determinations** for PTK faculty, but should be supplemented with other sources of information. The subcommittee recommends that the University model its approach to AEP and related processes on APT evaluations, which are based on a holistic review of teaching effectiveness that encompasses a range of feedback and evidence. The Provost's Office should also develop guidance on how the survey results should be interpreted.

The subcommittee has identified a series of constructs that should guide the development of replacement items (see following page). These constructs focus on areas where students are the best or only source of information; ask about specific practices are less prone to bias; and are focused on assessing baseline teaching practices and on identifying usage of best practices of teaching effectiveness. Nearly all of these constructs are backed by substantial research indicating their value in assessing instructor effectiveness; several constructs intended to directly inform registration decisions are based on suggestions from students. **Items addressing these proposed constructs should be developed by those with expertise in such assessments and should be piloted.** The subcommittee recommends that these replacement items then be presented to the Senate as an informational item, as was done in 2006. The length of the instrument should remain approximately the same. The subcommittee recommends that **Colleges and units be able to add up to five additional items** from a bank of questions that should be developed by the Course Eval Advisory Group, in consultation with the TLTC. These additional questions should be based on baseline and best practices of teaching effectiveness, as derived from literature in the field. Colleges and units should be consulted as the bank is developed and should have a mechanism to add additional items in consultation with the TLTC.

The University should **consider ways to make survey results more accessible**, including through links on course selection websites. The subcommittee also recommends that **grade distributions be made available to students**, a request that was consistent across the students consulted by the subcommittee.

The subcommittee acknowledges that changing the items will temporarily disrupt the ability to compare results over time, which will require some administrators to reconsider how results are used and interpreted. However, new items developed using the recommended constructs will provide more, and more valuable, information to all users of these results.

Recommended Constructs

The below constructs represent specific practices associated with teaching effectiveness. While example item text is provided parenthetically to illuminate the constructs, **the subcommittee is *not* recommending these specific items.** Actual items and wording would be developed by subject-matter experts, tested using cognitive interviews, and piloted before being adopted.

Constructs that Address Baseline and Best Practices in Teaching Effectiveness

- **Timely feedback** (e.g. "I get timely feedback on my work" or "The instructor returned assignments and exams in a timely manner")
- **Clear assignment expectations** (e.g. "Assignment expectations are clear to me" or "The instructor provided guidance for understanding course exercises")
- **Clear grading expectations** (e.g. "Grading criteria are clear to me" or "The instructor grades consistently with the evaluation criteria")
- **Focuses on course content in class sessions** (e.g. "Class sessions help me learn course material" or "The instructor used time effectively")
- **Value of required texts** (e.g. "The required texts (e.g., books, course packs, online resources) help me learn course material") - required by USM
- **Climate** (e.g. "The instructor helps students feel welcome" or "The instructor treats students with respect")
- **Instructor support** (e.g. "I think the instructor wants students to succeed" or "The instructor was helpful when I had difficulties or questions")
- **Quality feedback** (e.g. "The feedback (e.g., grades, comments, discussions, rubric scores) I get from the instructor helps me improve" or "The instructor provided constructive feedback")
- **Scaffolding** (e.g. "My instructor helps me understand new content by connecting it to things I already know" or "The course presented skills in a helpful sequence")
- **Cognitive engagement and/or rigor** (e.g. "The course developed my ability to think critically about the subject" or "This course was intellectually challenging")
- **Alignment of instruction to assessment** (e.g. "Assessments (e.g., tests, quizzes, papers) relate to course content" or "Graded assignments helped me understand the course material")

Constructs that Inform Student Registration Decisions

- **Course satisfaction** (e.g. "I would recommend this class" or "This course made me want to learn more about the subject")
- **Instructor satisfaction** (e.g. "I would take another course from this instructor if given the opportunity" or "I consistently enjoyed coming to class" or "I enjoyed learning from this instructor")
- **Time invested** (e.g. "On average, about how much time did you spend on this class each week (e.g., doing homework, meeting with project team, studying)?")
- **Major/Non-Major** (e.g. "How does this class fit into your academic plan or course of study?")

Constructs for Open-Ended Feedback (only visible to administrators and instructors)

- **Positive aspects** (e.g. "What did the instructor do that helped improve your learning in this course?")
- **Areas for improvement** (e.g. "What could the instructor do better or differently next time to help improve your learning in this course?")