

**Improvement of Instruction Committee**  
**Report to Faculty Senate Concerning SOS Task Force Recommendations A and B**  
February 2020

The Improvement of Instruction Committee was convened in January 2020 for the purpose of evaluating the recommendations of SOS Task Force. This report details the Improvement of Instruction Committee's recommendations regarding two central proposals of the Task Force: (A) adoption of a single university-wide instrument and (B) the implementation of a new on-line delivery system for Student Opinion Surveys (SOSs). Below are the recommendations of the committee.

**On SOS Task Force Recommendation A – A university-wide SOS instrument.**

The IOI committee wishes to address this recommendation in three parts:

**Part I – The Instrument**

The recommendations of the SOS Task Force (found in their White Paper) concerning changes to the SOS are as follows:

1. A set of nine questions common to all courses, using a common Likert scale. These questions can be found in the White Paper (page 2).
2. Three standard questions about how students support their learning. Which three questions a student is asked will depend on the delivery method of the course (e.g., on-line, in person, etc.)
3. Optional Directive Comment questions.
4. A procedure/mechanism by which units may add their own questions – after vetting - to the required common questions.

**Discussion**

The Committee wishes to first commend the SOS Task Force on their conscientious and collaborative work in developing the nine common questions, the questions on student support for learning, and the optional directive questions. The committee agrees that these questions are good instruments for gaining information about instruction. The committee also agrees that there must be a mechanism by which units can add their own questions. In summary, the IOI committee has no objections to any of these questions *per se*. The committee recommends that the questions be reviewed as part of the review that is completed prior to the end of the 2-year trial, and then periodically thereafter.

**Part II – The 'university-wide' implementation of the instrument**

The SOS Task force, in addition to proposing the new and improved survey questions, recommends that these questions be administered in all courses across all units. This appears to be a significant departure from current practice and is in direct violation of FAC 6.6. FAC 6.6 (2)(b) notes that “each academic unit must prepare and adopt formal procedures for conducting surveys of student opinions concerning instruction and courses.” A February, 2017 memo to academic units (attached) clarifies this policy by noting that each unit must include in its bylaws “an explicit statement of which SOS form(s) (e.g., standard University form, unit-specific form) the unit requires its faculty and instructional academic staff to use.” This policy seems to have been guided by the commitment to the claim that “there is no single set of survey questions about instructor effectiveness that is universally appropriate across disciplines, course levels, and programs” (FAC 6.6(2)(a)) as well as a commitment to the idea that “the primary principle which should guide the collection of student

opinions is that the content of the survey instrument and procedure used should be set by those closest to the field – the smallest academic unit engaged in personnel decisions” (FAC 6.6 (2)(c)1).

There was debate within the committee about the reasonableness of requiring all units to use the same base questions (“base questions” = the nine non-optional, Likert scale questions). On the one hand, there was concern about the appropriateness of using one instrument across all units—and the apparent incompatibility such a proposal with FAC 6.6. On the other hand, however, the committee was in agreement that the questions proposed in the “base questions” appear to be excellent instruments. In discussions with members of the SOS Task Force, we learned that these questions were carefully researched and vetted by the members of the Task Force who developed them. Ultimately, the committee was moved by the latter considerations. We believe these questions are likely to deliver useful information to all instructors. We recommend that they be part of the initial 2-year trial proposed by the SOS Task Force. The first line of thinking—and hesitation—results mainly from concerns about the use of SOS data in personnel decisions.

Much of FAC 6.6 concerns the use of Student Opinion Surveys in personnel decisions, which falls outside the scope of the Improvement of Instruction committee. Nevertheless, the IOI committee recommends that the Faculty Senate offer guidance on how to resolve what appears to be an inconsistency between FAC 6.6 and the SOS Task Force’s Proposal. The IOI committee considered a number of scenarios, but were unable to determine with certainty how the recommendations should be interpreted. For example, if all units are required to administer *and* use the 9 standard questions, this would seem to be in conflict with FAC 6.6. If, however, all units are required to administer the 9 standard questions but are not required to make use of them in personnel decisions, this would appear to be more consistent with FAC 6.6. In any case, given the uncertainty about the recommendation, we wish only to alert the Faculty Senate and to request further instructions. If FAC 6.6 is to be revised to accommodate the new system, the Improvement of Instruction committee will need further guidance, given the ambiguity noted above.

#### Improvement of Instruction Committee Recommendation

The IOI committee thus recommends the following:

**IOI-1: The proposed questions should be canonized as the standard questions, but a clear statement about department/unit responsibilities be drafted to clarify the requirements (and to alert units of the changes needed to their bylaws).**

#### Part III – Process for Adding Individual Questions

##### Discussion

In our discussions with SOS Task Force members, it was noted that part of the motivation for requiring all units to use the proposed standard questions was the discovery that many units were using ‘bad’ questions in their instruments. This is, from the point of view of improvement of instruction (and from the point of view of personnel decisions), an unfortunate finding. The SOS Task Force White Paper recommends, in addition to requiring all units to administer/use the 9 base questions, that a process be created to assess the merits of any questions that any unit wishes to add to the standard set. The motivation for this is to prevent such bad or biased questions from appearing on any Student Opinion Surveys. We recommend, however, that this problem be addressed by clarifying the review process already in place for department and unit bylaws (which currently includes a provision for evaluating SOS instruments). The current policy requires (a)

departments/units to review their bylaws periodically and (b) for departments/units to include any documents that they reference in their bylaws. The February, 2017 letter to all academic units (attached) specifies that the bylaws committee shall report deficiencies to the Improvement of Instruction Committee. The IOI committee has received no such report since 2017 despite the discovery, by the task force, of such deficiencies. Thus, we recommend the following:

**IOI-2: The Faculty Senate clarify the deficiencies to which the bylaws committee should be alerted. Perhaps consider including a member of the IOI committee on the bylaws committee, or as an advisor.**

The IOI committee, in order to facilitate the initial two-year trial of the new system, is willing to evaluate any questions added by individual units in the following way: We propose that when a unit wishes to add questions to the standard SOS set, the unit must also provide information indicating the usefulness of each question. Requiring a ‘statement of justification’ is likely to increase the quality of added questions. The IOI committee feels that assessing such ‘statements of justification’ is likely to be more tractable than assessing the questions directly. If, at any point during the 2-year trial, the volume of such additions becomes unmanageable, only then would we recommend revising the current system (unit bylaws→bylaws committee→IOI committee) or introducing a new process. We recommend the following:

**IOI-3: During or at the end of the two-year trial, all questions added by individual units, along with their accompanying ‘statements of justification’ should be submitted to the Improvement of Instruction committee (or, at the discretion of the Faculty Senate, some other appropriate body containing the relevant expertise\*) to be evaluated for bias or other faults.**

A final note on added questions: While the IOI committee agrees that some ‘bad’ questions—especially those that involve, create, or perpetuate various biases—are best avoided, many members of the committee expressed concern about putting in place a process that would unduly restrict units’ ability to engage in assessing instruction in new ways. While we are, as an academic culture, eager to uphold, implement, and be guided by what we accept as ‘best practices’, it must be remembered that all such practices are ultimately the result of experimentation in the classroom and in the assessment of instruction and student learning.

### **On Recommendation B – On-Line Administration of SOS**

The SOS Task force recommends that SOSs be administered on-line via a two-year trial of *Qualtrics Classroom*.

#### **Discussion**

From the point of view of improvement of instruction, the key question about delivery method concerns the rates of participation. The information in the SOS Task Force White Paper and from the IOI committee’s discussions with SOS Task Force members can be summarized as follows: on-

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\* The IOI committee is not composed of members who have any special expertise in these matters, nor are we aware of any such body on campus. The members of the committee do, however, feel better equipped to assess the ‘statements of justification’ noted in the discussion above.

line survey instruments tend to have lower response rates. This fact raises doubts for the committee about whether moving to an on-line delivery system can be recommended *from the point of view of* improvement of instruction. Lower response rates mean less information and, in some cases—where response rates fall below a certain threshold—useless data. Of course, improvement of instruction is not the only use for the SOS, but whatever the use, lower response rates are likely to be a problem. On the other hand, however, we do note (and commend the SOS Task Force for their focus on this) that the White Paper recommends several practices to support on-line delivery. These measures should be taken seriously as means of mitigating the decline in response rates. The SOS Task Force’s recognition of the need for such measures should not be overlooked. Put simply, if SOSs are administered on-line and no other actions are taken, response rates will decline significantly. With these considerations in mind, the improvement of instruction committee makes the following recommendations:

**IOI-4 – While there are concerns about response rates, the IOI committee recommends the two-year trial with *Qualtrics Classroom* AND (at a minimum) the production, publication, and publicization of a set of best practices for mitigating a decline in response rates.**

**IOI-5 – The team tasked with implementing the new on-line SOS system should have as one of its objectives the development of a set of practices, tools, and resources that are likely to help increase response rates.**



TO: Academic Units  
FROM: Faculty Senate Bylaws Committee  
DATE: February 27, 2017  
RE: Guidance on Expected Bylaws Revisions and Approval Procedures

The purpose of this memo is to provide guidance to academic units regarding Faculty Senate expectations on two matters: unit approval sequence for bylaws changes and inclusion of language related to Student Opinion Surveys (SOS).

#### Changes to Unit Bylaws

The Faculty Senate will not approve bylaws changes without at least one additional level of review within a College for changes to the Bylaws of an academic department. Department and/or College Bylaws should specify the review sequence for the unit. If additional bodies are involved, such as a standing committee of the College, that body's bylaws should discuss its role in the unit's bylaws change approval process.

The Faculty Senate also expects that, when units submit changes to their bylaws, they submit two documents: one clean version of the new bylaws and one version that clearly "tracks" the changes to the unit's bylaws. The Faculty Senate will not consider bylaws changes without both documents.

#### Inclusion of language related to SOS

In February 2015, the Faculty Senate approved changes to FAC 6.6. Specifically, in section 6.6(2)(b), the Senate added a requirement for "formal procedures for conducting surveys of student opinions concerning instruction and courses." These procedures "should" be part of unit bylaws and "must include procedures and a description of which forms are to be used." (The complete language in FAC 6.6(2)(b) is included at the end of this memo).

The Faculty Senate expects the following for units to be in compliance with FAC 6.6(2)(b):

- The information required is:
  - An explicit statement of which SOS form(s) (e.g., standard University form, unit-specific form) the unit requires its faculty and instructional academic staff to use.
  - An explicit statement of the frequency with which the unit requires its faculty and instructional academic staff to collect SOS data. The Faculty Senate recommends units require SOS data collection in every semester and in every section to provide all students with the opportunity to evaluate classes and instructors.
  - An explicit description of how the unit will use the information provided on the SOS forms in (1) merit reviews, (2) consideration of renewal, promotion, tenure, and

- professorial productivity decisions, and (3) post-tenure review. This description must include
- The specific SOS items that will be given particular emphasis, if any
  - The benchmark for performance expectations (e.g., the College mean)
  - The amount of available SOS information from a given review period that must be included in the review. The Faculty Senate recommends that units require consideration of 100% of the available information to prevent cherry-picking. The Faculty Senate acknowledges the right of the instructor to provide, in the narrative related to teaching activities, discussion of anomalous SOS information and/or SOS information below a benchmark.
- Each academic unit's bylaws must either explicitly include the above information or an explicit reference to the documents (e.g., College bylaws or policy) that contain the information listed above.
  - During Spring 2017, units should submit any referenced documents along with their revised bylaws to Faculty Senate. The Faculty Senate will make sure that that the references in the bylaws are accurate, and maintain copies of any referenced documents in the Senate office.
  - The Bylaws Committee of the Faculty Senate will only recommend approval of bylaws to the Faculty Senate. The Bylaws Committee will refer potential deficiencies in the information in any referenced documents to the Improvement of Instruction Committee.
  - After Spring 2017, *unless you have come to the 'at least every five years' bylaws review cycle (Faculty Constitution, Article VIII, Section 7)*, units need only submit bylaws changes when they occur because the reference documents will be on file in the Senate office.
  - Changes to referenced documents (independent of changes to bylaws) should be submitted to the Faculty Senate so that the most current version is available in the Senate office.

For your reference, the full language from FAC 6.6(2)(b) is here:

(b) Each academic unit (departments of instruction in the College of Letters and Science or the college, elsewhere) must prepare and adopt formal procedures for conducting surveys of student opinions concerning instruction and courses. These procedures should be included as part of the bylaws of each academic unit and must include procedures and a description of which forms are to be used. Academic units which have procedures in place will be required to confirm that they are consonant with this policy upon each review of their bylaws. Each unit will consult with, but not seek the approval of, the college regarding its proposed instructor and written procedure.