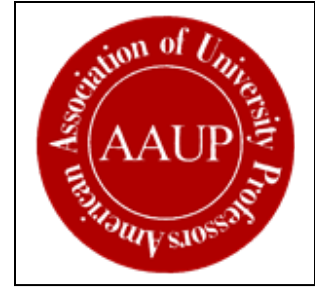


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November 13, 2020

Dear Provost Byrnes,

As everybody in higher education expected, COVID-19 is affecting all aspects of higher education. Teaching, the university's core mission, has been transformed—temporarily, one hopes—in profound ways. Remote teaching, relying on methods of instruction unimaginable to most less than a year ago, has now become the norm.

It is, therefore, both inevitable and prudent that MTSU collect as much information as possible about the experiences of students and faculty members in this new world. To ensure that our students continue to receive the quality education reflective of the reputation MTSU has earned through hard work must be the focus of every individual and entity on our campus. MTSU's major effort this semester to gather information about the new normal is the "*Student Course Delivery* survey," announced by Dr. Cheryl Torsney (Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs) on September 1.

We believe that the university, in its commendable effort to guarantee the high quality of education everybody has come to expect, has in this case relied on counter-productive measures. In our view, the survey does not serve its stated purpose; it compromises principles of shared governance; it supplants existing policy structures; and it damages the campus climate, specifically the relationship of trust between the administration and the faculty.

As Dr. Torsney explained in her September 1 email, "we're eager to learn more about how we're using new models of delivery and new technologies. To that end, administration, in consultation with Faculty Senate, has developed a very short survey for students to take a few times during the fall semester." This survey "is designed," Dr. Torsney continues, "to spot problems so that we may quickly resolve them. It does not replace the traditional Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET). Furthermore, the survey responses will not be used to inform annual evaluation or promotion and tenure recommendations." This sounds reasonable. Nevertheless, almost all aspects of this survey—from development via administration to use—raise concerns.

Although the phrase "in consultation with Faculty Senate" is strictly speaking correct, the process of developing the survey was rushed. The full Senate never had the opportunity to discuss the survey. Since the survey, regardless of the purpose it allegedly serves, is an evaluation of faculty performance, the faculty should have been involved in every step of the process: development, administration, and evaluation. As the AAUP's statement "Principles of Academic Governance during the COVID-19 Pandemic," published June 29, 2020, points out: "The COVID-19 pandemic must not become the occasion for administrations or governing boards to jettison normative principles of academic governance." This statement draws on the AAUP's "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," which points out that "[t]he faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas of curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction." Indeed, the statement goes on to recommend that even after initial consultation, "[i]t is desirable that the faculty should, following such communication, have opportunity for further consideration and further transmittal of its view." Basic principles of shared governance require this process in contexts where faculty expertise is central. The token advisement of a few members of the Senate is not a good faith effort to implement these principles

Furthermore, the design of the survey does not reflect accepted standards of pedagogical evaluation. Questions such as "What is working well in this course?" and "Do you have any suggestions for improvement in this course?" are not obviously related to the survey's stated purpose. If the survey is designed to help faculty "learn more about how we're using new models of delivery and new technologies," to quote Dr. Torsney's September 1 email again, these

questions serve no purpose. These questions are in sharp contrast to the SET instrument which includes questions designed to gather "objective" information (How many classes did you miss? What grade do you expect?). The purpose of those questions is to contextualize the questions directly addressing the faculty member's performance to give the reader a sense of the student writing the evaluation. This survey doesn't do that. In other words, it implies that student perception is fact.

One of the most surprising aspects of this survey is that it was distributed to the students and has not yet been shared with the faculty, several months after its initial distribution. We find this deeply disturbing and further evidence that the faculty were shut out from this process.

According to Pipeline, results for individual courses will be available to the faculty in December. Yet, we have learned from a colleague's email that the results have already been used to informally discipline a faculty member and to request changes in pedagogical methods—based on information that is not available to the individual faculty member.

Other decisions regarding the data also give us pause about the validity and usefulness of the survey. Dr. Torsney's October 20 email informs the faculty that the data from the survey will be disaggregated down to the section, sections with fewer than 10 students will be combined to protect student confidentiality, and "[c]hairs may share that information with individual faculty members." In effect, faculty members are given access to student evaluations before they have determined grades, a violation of one of the safeguards for open and honest evaluations.

Another problem is the very low student response rate. According to an October 8 email from Dr. Torsney, the survey response rate to the September survey was only 5.14%: "1,385 students submitted 4,881 responses about 2,576 course sections, or 5.14% of the 94,666 total enrollment in all full term and A1 sections." What kind of decisions can be based on a 5.14% response rate?

And, finally, even though Dr. Torsney stated in her September 1 email that the "survey responses will not be used to inform annual evaluation and promotion and tenure recommendations," what is there to prevent the university to continue to administer course evaluations during the semester and to use them for exactly that purpose?

We urge the administration to take seriously the faculty's commitment to quality teaching, even during the Covid19 pandemic. Looking ahead to Spring 2021, we recommend that any survey used to assess faculty performance meet the following conditions:

- that an ad hoc committee of faculty work with the administration to establish the goals of the survey and generate the questions.
- that both the goals and the questions be reviewed by a professional with survey experience in order to ensure the highest quality instrument.
- that the response threshold should be agreed upon in terms of representing usable data
- that faculty members receive the information at the same time as administrators.

Best wishes,

Ellen Donovan, President

Alfred Lutz, President-Elect