

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2020

Dear Faculty:

The disruption of this semester caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 has generated concerns regarding the solicitation of course feedback from our students and the use of that feedback. We are not alone. Similar discussions are happening at our peer institutions. While there is no consensus among our peers about what exactly should be done, nearly all of our peers are instituting some modifications to the collection of course feedback and/or its use in academic administration and evaluation. The purpose of this memorandum is to outline a set of procedures and policies, for this semester only, which will provide our students with a meaningful opportunity to share their experiences while recognizing the unique context in which this semester's classes took place.

Logistically, this issue arises at a particularly bad time because Syracuse University is transitioning to a new course feedback system, and this semester we have schools and colleges using three different systems. Some are piloting the new EvaluationKit system; most are using the existing online system administered by the Office of Institutional Research; and a few are still using paper forms. Moreover, at least one academic unit has already begun the student evaluation process. It does not make sense, and is frankly impossible, to institute a new campus-wide feedback process at this late date. The approach outlined here will be conducted in conjunction with our existing feedback processes.

The other key issue in this discussion is how course feedback from this unusual semester will be used. Some faculty feel that the abrupt transition from the residential format to online learning makes it hard for students to evaluate properly the quality of the course. More generally, there is concern about the potential for students to conflate frustrations they may have regarding the change in instructional format with the performance of their instructors. To the extent that student course feedback is used as one measure of faculty performance, these are issues of concern to all faculty, especially untenured and non-tenure-track faculty.

With this background, the Office of Academic Affairs institutes the following procedures and policies for the Spring 2020 semester:

1. Schools, colleges and departments will carry on with their current plans and processes for collecting student course feedback in the Spring 2020 semester.
2. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment (IEA) will conduct a separate survey of all students to gather feedback on the University's transition of residential classes to online format. Even students who have already completed the course feedback process can take part in this survey.

3. IEA will offer prototype questions that schools, colleges and departments can integrate (or not) into their existing course feedback instruments. Laura Harrington (lavut@syr.edu) in IEA is the contact person for this purpose.
4. Tenure-track faculty will not be expected to include course feedback from the Spring 2020 semester in materials submitted for third-year reviews, tenure reviews or promotion reviews. Course feedback from Spring 2020 will not be used in the evaluation of tenured or tenure-track faculty for annual performance reviews, tenure or promotion unless the faculty member voluntarily includes them in materials submitted for review. Again, faculty may voluntarily include these materials, but there is no expectation that faculty will choose to do so.
5. Course feedback from Spring 2020 will not be used in the evaluation of non-tenure-track faculty for annual merit raises or the renewal of contracts, unless the faculty member voluntarily includes them in materials submitted for review. This is intended to apply to part-time instructors and adjuncts, as well as full-time non-tenure-track faculty.

Sincerely,

Zhanjiang (John) Liu

Interim Vice Chancellor and Provost