To: SRI Task Force
From: Sheila Rucki
RE: SRI Task Force Proposal

10 March 2014

The committee's desire to end this task force, with our without a consensus position, seems premature to me. I have reviewed the committee charge, as discussed at our first meeting, and note that our charge included an obligation to review the literature produced by experts in the field as a prerequisite for our recommendations. It seems to me that we have not done this.   To put forward recommendations that are not supported by research seems to me to violate the spirit of the committee, as I understand it.

In this spirit, I would like to flesh out the compromise position that I offered on 03 February, derived from existing peer reviewed research, and simplify it into a less rigorous but more practical policy, one that could be implemented as early as this year without substantial costs. I believe it addresses the expressed concerns of those who wish to include comments as well as the concerns of the Faculty Senate. Like any compromise position, it does not leave everyone happy.

Overview

In February, I recommended that the written comments from the SRIs not be included until "they can be anonymously and objectively weighted by reviewers" and made reference to the Wonsurawat (2011). Since then, the following points have emerged:

1. Individuals advocating for comment inclusion have made it clear that no single comment is useful for summative purposes but that patterns may emerge that some find to be useful.
2. There may be due process issues in allowing some reviewers but not others to have access to written comments in the summative process.
3. The bulk of comments may overwhelm higher levels of review.
4. Chairs have an obligation to use the comments for formative purposes, preferably documenting these formative uses in letters uploaded to Digital Measures in non-comprehensive review years.
5. There may be reasons to expurgate the comments following comprehensive reviews in order to avoid reviews being influenced by expired material.

In addition, I continue to be troubled by the undue influence that negative outliers may have on overall perceptions based on the negativity bias that we have discussed at length and need not review here. I believe that ignoring this research, acting as if we are immune to it or that rational reviewers are somehow not subject to it is not supported by the literature and cannot be the foundation of a compromise. Furthermore, admonishing reviewers to not be overly influenced by negative outliers is unlikely to have any impact. The bias is insidious because it does not operate at the level of consciousness.

Proposal

My goal is to offer a proposal that addresses all of our concerns, at least in part. The challenge is to construct a method for using the comments that retains their value in terms of exposing patterns while reducing the likelihood that those patterns are unduly influenced by outliers. At the same time, a proposal that addresses the legal and practical complications of reviewing six years of comments would be good.

My recommendation is that scans of the SRI forms where the reviewer's Likert rating on the second question (Faculty Contribution to the Course) is within one standard deviation of the mean for the class be uploaded to Digital Measure for review by all levels of review and that they be purged following each comprehensive review cycle.

For example, if the mean for a course is 4.4 and the standard deviation for that section is 1, all SRI sheets with a Likert score of between 3.4 and 5.4 would be uploaded. As a practical measure, since there are no fractional Likert options,   sheets scoring between 3 and 5 would be uploaded and the comments available to reviewers. Outliers on either side would have their Likert score averaged into the numerical ranking for the course but their comments would not be part of the digital record.

Rationale

This system has several advantages over existing practices or the idea that we warn reviewers to be aware of the possible influence of outliers.

First, it preserves the ability of reviewers to detect patterns while reducing the likelihood that outliers of either kind will influence those patterns. The underlying assumption is similar to that of Wongsurawat; the comments from outliers are more likely to contain idiosyncratic material and less likely to reliably reflect the course. This also respects the position of those on the committee who argue that comments should be included because their value is in the patterns they reveal, not in any individual comment taken out of context.

Next, this proposal would eliminate some number of the comments for each class. Of course, this number is not precise and I assume that the distributions are not normal so the exact number of excluded SRI will vary. The important factor is that this system will eliminate severe outliers so we will not need to trust that reviewers are immune to negativity bias generated by non-representative comments. Negative comments included will, by definition, not be from outliers and, thus, presumably more valid representations of the class. Patterns that emerge will also be less subject to bias.

I look forward to a discussion of this proposal.

Sincerely,

Sheila Rucki