Colleagues:

The teaching environment at TCU

*In the timeless debate anent the tensions in the chicken house, (he) has been known to claim both
the innocence of the chicken and the magnanimity of the fox with equal sincerity and aplomb.*
Anon., attributed to Oscar Wilde.

The central organizing principle of the academic experience offered to students at TCU is
based on the teacher-scholar model. Improving the quality of this model is a challenge shared by
faculties, students and administrators.

An old cynicism that I first encountered back in the 1970s runs as follows: "A lecture is
a process by which the notes of the teacher are transferred to the notes of the student without
having passed through the minds of either." Our counters to this at TCU are (1) the teacher-
scholar, ideally an individual whose passion for creative expression and scholarship is matched
by their commitment to light similar passions in those entrusted to their academic care, and (2)
the inspirational teacher, ideally an individual passionately dedicated to the high art of teaching.

Shared Governance

The organizational relationship of the university with faculty is participatory rather than
hierarchical; this relationship is usually conceptualized as "shared governance". Shared
governance is a recognition of the singular role that faculty members have in the Academy by
virtue of their creative activity, scholarship and the quality of their arts. Members of the faculty
have deep and distinguished sets of skills, teaching abilities and knowledge bases (often uniquely
so) that are essential to the success of the University. Administration brings another skill set to
the table, ideally competence in stewardship, management and consensus building. The time-
honored balance between these two skill sets is critical to the success of the University.

One aspect of shared governance is the notion that the faculty, as a whole, is responsible for the
design of the learning experience (i.e., the curriculum, broadly defined) while academic
administration is responsible for the implementation of the design. Part of the implementation of
the design is to assess and assure quality.

The evaluation of teaching

Teaching, whether conducted by parents or professionals, whether formal or informal, is
arguably the single most important act of leadership in our society. It has always been thus - the
Wisdom of the Elders has been the constant link between generations. The quality of the
learning experience that teachers, of whatever pedigree, provide defines the quality of our shared

future – presently a future that is so complex that we cannot afford to be collectively complacent nor individually self-satisfied.

Surely part of our responsibility as academics and administrators is to constantly attempt to improve the learning experience for which we are responsible. Indeed most of us who teach self-evaluate on an ongoing basis – we know when we are on our "A game" and we know when we are not. And we know how to improve. Or do we?

The evaluation of teaching is an area of sensitivity for some faculty - few of us enjoy criticism. Many of us are uncomfortable with the process - is it intrinsically fair and justly administered? And, an argument from olden days - is it necessary? Whilst this latter is no longer acceptable in a culture that increasingly requires and mandates accountability, those who judge and evaluate have a responsibility to be fair and just.

Who then are the stakeholders in the evaluation of teaching?

At least four groups can be identified:

1. Students and their parents- expecting to receive the finest educational experience possible (and paying for it!).
2. Faculty - intent, as dedicated professionals, on improving the quality and impact of their message, and, as a second interest, in earning recognition of their excellence as teachers. The latter interest affects tenure, promotion and merit decisions as well as being a decisive criterion for various awards.
3. The University - concerned with delivering the overall promise to students of a great educational experience and also concerned with recognizing and rewarding excellence in teaching.
4. The accrediting agency - SACS (in the case of TCU), concerned with assessment and accountability and functioning as a surrogate for Government and the public interest.

"On the Evaluation of TCU Faculty Teaching"

Following a great deal of work, the Faculty Senate has developed a set of seven principles that they believe are important to the teaching mission of the University. **This document can be referenced in its entirety on the Senate web page and at** http://www.ir.tcu.edu/zfiles/facsenatespot.pdf.

One point made by the Senate (in principle three), is the idea that there is no one-size-fits-all formula for assessing faculty teaching performance and that each college, department and program "must decide which evaluative practices are best suited to its individual needs." The Senate also offers a list of thirteen best practices (many of which already are used in pre-tenure review by departments).

The Senate also recommends (in principle six) that "All faculty must be individually informed of the specific criteria that will be used to evaluate their teaching." I know from conversations with new faculty that there is confusion on this issue. And the confusion is not

confined to expectations anent teaching - research and service are also mentioned, particularly with respect to tenure requirements.

A further point (in principle five) reads "In the evaluation of teaching, at least three evaluative practices must be used; SPOTs, eSPOTs or other forms of student feedback must constitute no more than one third of the weight of the evaluation process."

I have a few concerns with this statement. In the first place principle five would seem to be somewhat at odds with principle three, which speaks to the autonomy of colleges, departments and programs. Secondly, most of the best practices recommended are qualitative rather than quantitative; it seems to me that, without vigilance, the quantitative SPOT scores will eventually become the default measures of teaching, which I would agree is not a good thing. Thirdly, implementing the recommendations will place an additional workload on Department chairs who will need to call on the wisdom and work of their faculty colleagues.

So the challenge of shared governance is here - let's have an academy-wide conversation about the evaluation of teaching. **I challenge and expect each Department and College to react to the Senate Report and by the end of this academic year present me with clear recommendations as to how they will evaluate teaching.** And let us always remember that improving the illumination provided by our collective torch is our purpose.

And now, let's consider something completely similar...

Student Perceptions of Teaching - SPOT - the dreaded acronym

<u>Can students evaluate teachers?</u>

I have been evaluating teachers since I was about 10 years old. The person who taught me geometry at the UK equivalent to High School was a much more effective teacher than the one who taught me algebra. My Latin teachers were much better than my French maîtres. The person who taught me physical geography at high school was the finest formal teacher that I have ever had and greatly influenced the direction of my life. He was the one who first hinted that I might want to aim for a position in academia. Throughout my life - even in my antique years - there have been teachers who have kick-started my interest in "stuff" and there have been others, best forgotten, who did little to help me on my journey.

<u>The use of SPOTs</u>

SPOT evaluations serve five principal purposes:

- In helping to determine the teaching component of a merit raise, a process conducted primarily by the chair, with potential modification by the Dean.
- As part of the assessment of tenure-track performance in the classroom, again a process conducted primarily by the chair and tenured faculty of the department.
- In nominations for tenure and promotion initiated within departments and with subsequent evaluations by the Colleges and Provost.

• In post-tenure review.
• In support of nominations for teaching awards both within the University and nationally.

From the point of view of those charged with assessing the impact of teaching, the attractiveness of SPOT scores lies first in their quantitative simplicity, secondly in the involvement of students in the process and thirdly as a demonstration to external agencies that we take assessment seriously.

In general, faculty at TCU appear to generate very fine qualitative and quantitative SPOT responses from the great majority of students. Indeed many of the personal comments are highly complimentary and attest to high impact education. In general it is easy to demonstrate from SPOT scores that TCU "delivers."

Concerns about SPOT
There are concerns about the use of SPOT scores amongst both students and faculty. So let's examine a few.

Student concerns anent SPOT include:

• Anonymity - will there be repercussions if, for example, my handwriting can be recognized and I have the same professor in another class?
• Will anyone actually read my comments?
• Will anything be done if I voice my criticism?
• The faculty member deliberately gives out the forms right at the end of class so that I do not have time to write anything significant.
• How does the evaluation given at the end of the course help me in that course?

On the other side of the coin, faculty concerns anent SPOT include:

• How authentic are the results?
• Student responses may be manipulated by (other) adroit faculty for personal reasons - this can lead to grade inflation.
• Students are in no position to understand the totality or context of the design of the course so how can they possibly evaluate it effectively?
• A few students make it personal and even lie.
• Many of the questions asked on the SPOT forms are simply not useful in a pedagogical context.
• The results may be used by a nefarious administration in ways that may not be in my best interests.
• The results do not come back to the professor in a timely fashion.

Whilst some of these questions, from both sets of constituents, do not withstand close scrutiny, others are authentic and require attention. During the past few years, the University Evaluation Committee, chaired by Judy Groulx, has developed a new set of questions that answer some of these concerns and have the virtue of being of much greater value in assessment. The work of this committee is much appreciated and dovetails nicely with the current move to eSPOT technology.

Electronic SPOTs

So let's have a conversation anent the tricky issue of electronic SPOTs. We are implementing these this fall, having previously run a couple of pilot programs, and I know that some of you have concerns, similar to those listed above but also including concerns about student participation rates, student conspiracies etc.

Candidly the first eSPOT program that we ran a few years ago was a failure. However, representatives from the University Evaluation Committee, the Academic Excellence Committee, Information Technology Resources, and the Office of Institutional Research closely examined three online course assessment systems. The SmartEvals! system selected stood out for several reasons:

• Its functionality as an instructor development tool;
• An ability to allow instructors to add their own questions;
• An ability to assign different question sets, based on college, department, program, or course type interests;
• An ability to handle complex course combinations (i.e., cross-listed, combined, and team taught courses); compatibility with the TCU portal; plus many other features.

For details of the considerable faculty discussions on eSPOTS please visit the wiki space for all faculty created by Catherine Wehlburg (the URL to join the forum is http://tcuespot.wikispaces.com).

The technical complexities of the move to eSPOTs have been navigated by Cathy Coghlan, Tanisha Arrington, Ruben Chanlatte, their colleagues in the Offices of Institutional Research (Lee-Ann McKay and Lindsey Millns), Academic Affairs Technologies (Laura Adcock) and Information Technology (Jeff Stanley, Josh Harmon, and Lenelda Pennington). I am very grateful to them for their thorough and conscientious work.

The essential information about eSPOTs is available at http://www.ir.tcu.edu/espotfaq.asp - an eSPOT FAQ link on the Office of Institutional Research home page. At this site other URLs allow you to access the Survey Instruments, timetables etc., so I will not go into details here. Nevertheless there are a couple of points that I would like to explain. We will not conduct eSPOTs for classes with a combined enrollment of three or less (in order to meet the students concerns anent anonymity). Such classes should be evaluated by the individual departments, using other means. Regular courses with traditionally low enrollments (such as music performance courses) have been combined in the past in order to achieve a critical mass and protect the anonymity of students. This will continue to be the practice for these types of courses with the transition to eSPOT.

Secondly, classes with an enrollment between four and seven have the **option** of administering a qualitative eSPOT survey. This is in response to the noisy mathematicians, who tell us from their Olympian heights that the sample size is too small for statistical validity. Having said that, if I am going for tenure and have done a great job - I may want to have the quantitative data - which is why you have the option.

One concern that we share is ensuring that the response rates from students are high. From research elsewhere, Cathy Coghlan offers the following tips:

1) Make an announcement at the beginning and/or end of every class meeting during the SPOT survey period. The students receive the invitation via email so be sure to tell them to check their TCU e-mail accounts. Students will also see an eSPOT icon each time they login through the TCU portal during the eSPOT survey period. If possible, give students a concrete example of how you have used information from prior SPOTs to make adjustments to your courses.

2) Encourage students to bring their laptop, iPad, or tablet to class on a particular day during the SPOT survey period and set aside part of that class time for students to complete the SPOT.

3) If feasible, schedule time in a computer lab during the survey period to allow students to complete the SPOT.

I am sure that there will be some hiccups as we implement the new system. Please have patience when this is so - we are all in pursuit of perfection.

Cordially,

Nowell Donovan

Nowell Donovan

Epilogue
Last week I was treated to a 7:00 am breakfast by a group of about 30 young men, many of whom were first year students, some transfers. They all wore ties (with one exception). We met in the BLUU and had a splendid conversation about the impact and qualities of TCU. To a person, they were complimentary about our campus - and I was greatly struck and pleased to hear them reference the high quality of their classroom experience. In particular they were thrilled by the personal interest that their professors showed in them.
So, from my perspective, three thoughts:

1. Thank you for all that you do so often and so well.
2. Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Evaluations - eSPOTs et al. - are as scary as you let them be. We can all improve in all ways, always.
3. We share a collective enemy - IGNORANCE. So let's kick it in the butt!