Student misconduct and teaching evaluations policy proposal

University of Oregon Senate Meeting
March 15, 2017
Who I am:

• Robert Lipshitz, Associate Professor of Mathematics.

• I have been at UO since Fall 2015. Before that I was a faculty member at Columbia University for most of 10 years.

• I have not had students cheat in my class at UO so far, to the best of my knowledge. (I’ve been lucky for the last year.) However:
  • I supervise graduate students and postdocs and mentor assistant professors who have.
  • Before coming to UO I was Calculus Director at Columbia for a year, overseeing roughly 5,000 students, and have taught more than 500, so have extensive experience dealing with student cheating.
On cheating

• Students cheat in various ways:
  • Copying solutions.
  • Taking exams “by proxy”.
  • Stashing notes in the bathroom.
  • ...

• Cheating hurts:
  • The students cheating.
  • All honest students, by creating unfair competition.
  • Class morale.

• So, policing student cheating is important and, at UO, mandatory.
Uses of course evaluations

• When evaluating classes.
• When evaluating instructors, for salary, promotion, and retention.
• When applying for jobs. Job applicants in mathematics, and other fields, are often expected to provide numerical course evaluation information.

So:
• Accurate information is valuable.
• Distorted information hurts careers.
The problem.

• Students who have cheated and been reported for cheating can still fill out course evaluations, potentially vindictively.

• This happens.

• It discourages reporting, and harms instructors who do their jobs.

• The same applies to students who have been reported for harassment or other misconduct.
How often does this happen?

• I know of 2 cases in the Math Department where 4 or more students cheated on a midterm exam and were reported, in a class of 35 or fewer, in the last year.

• In both cases, the instructor was in a junior position, so vulnerable.

• I didn’t even ask around to find out about other cases.
Does it have an effect?

- Evaluations from an excellent math instructor:

  Lipshitz, Math 342, Spring 2016. Enrollment 30, **76% response rate**.
Does it really have an effect?

• Evaluations from an excellent math instructor:

Course average: 4.5
Department average: 4.0

Actual

Course average: 4.0
Department average: 4.0

With 4 disaffected students
Does it really have an effect?

• Evaluations from a hypothetical average math instructor:

  Instructional quality

  Exceptional (5.0) | Good (4.0) | Adequate (3.0) | Somewhat Inadequate (2.0) | Unsatisfactory (1.0)

  Course average: 4.0
  Department average: 4.0

  Honest

  Instructional quality

  Exceptional (5.0) | Good (4.0) | Adequate (3.0) | Somewhat Inadequate (2.0) | Unsatisfactory (1.0)

  Course average: 3.5
  Department average: 4.0

  With 4 disaffected students
Proposed remedy:

• Remove evaluations from students responsible for cheating or other misconduct in a class.
• Students still welcome to provide their feedback in other forums.
Concluding comments

• There are many other concerns about course evaluations, and I am glad that the Senate will conduct a broader review of course evaluations.

• This particular issue affects our instructors and graduate students (and everyone else) immediately, but is easy to ameliorate.

• The Senate should vote to immediately stop punishing our graduate students, instructors, and faculty for reporting misconduct.