

Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee (AF&T)
December 4, 2020
Minutes of the Meeting

These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate; none of the comments, conclusions or actions reported in these minutes reflect the views of, nor are they binding on, the senate, the administration or the Board of Regents.

[**In these minutes:** Call to Order and Welcome; Student Rating of Teaching (SRT) Forms in the Evaluation of Teaching and Issues of Bias; Academic Freedom in the Absence of Tenure Protections; Report from Panel Members on “*Making the Implicit Explicit*” Communications Plan]

PRESENT: Gopalan Nadathur (chair), Brian Bix, Cameron Cook, Sumanth Gopinath, Vladas Griskevicius, Ole Gram, Danya Leebaw, Yuichiro Onishi, Gary Peter, Karin Quick, Rachna Shah, Clifford Steer, George Weiblen

REGRETS: Bruno Chaouat, Hon Ki Cheung, Timothy Wiedmann, Becky Yust

GUESTS: Helen Kinsella, associate professor, Political Science & Law, College of Liberal Arts, Karen Miksch, associate professor, Higher Education & Law, College of Education and Human Development

1. Call to Order and Welcome

Gopalan Nadathur, chair, welcomed committee members and briefly reviewed the agenda for today’s meeting. He then invited Rachna Shah to begin her presentation.

2. Student Rating of Teaching (SRT) Forms in the Evaluation of Teaching and Issues of Bias

Shah presented a [PowerPoint](#) overview of documents, regarding SRTs, that had been provided to the committee prior to the meeting. The documents referenced are:

- [Proposal to Adopt Holistic Teaching Evaluation Processes](#), written by the University of Minnesota Women’s Faculty Cabinet
- [Using Student Rating of Teaching \(SRT\) Results in Evaluating Teaching](#), provided by the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost
- [Documenting and Reviewing Teaching Effectiveness](#), provided by the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost

Shah listed three purposes for today’s discussion:

- To illuminate the significance of the problem of bias in SRTs.
- To discuss how to create a more holistic evaluation process which would include SRTs as a component.
- To evaluate the types of training that would be required to use SRTs (and other evaluative tools) more effectively.

Nadathur next invited Ole Gram, associate vice provost, Faculty and Academic Affairs, to share a brief history of the use of SRTs at the University. Gram's overview included the following:

- SRTs have been used at the University for over 80 years, and he suggests that there is an over-reliance on them because they are easy to use and less time consuming than other methods of evaluation.
- Numerous studies indicate there is no doubt that SRT results contain biases, yet research is inconclusive as to the exact nature of the biases.
- Best practices emphasize not over relying on SRT results, and the University has attempted to de-emphasize their use in evaluation over the past 10 to 12 years.
- It is recommended to use SRTs along with other measures such as peer reviews. While peer observation protocols may be much more time consuming and labor intensive, they can be extremely useful and detailed.
- SRTs can provide "actionable" information for instructors and evaluators (increasing the level of respect felt by students, clarity of presentation, etc.)

Gram then invited questions from the committee. Vlad Griskevicius said it appears that there are two distinct views of bias in SRTs being presented today: 1) the research shows evidence of bias, and 2) the research is inconclusive. He asked that there be further clarification regarding what the committee is being asked to comment on.

Helen Kinsella, associate professor, Political Science & Law, College of Liberal Arts, also expressed concern stating that in her research done with the Women's Faculty Cabinet it is not inconclusive that there is a bias in SRTs against those identifying as female. She added that it is, however, difficult to determine if minor differences in SRT scores can be attributable *solely* to bias.

A robust discussion followed as committee members and guests referred to several examples of research corroborating their opinions:

- [Evidence of Bias in Standard Evaluations of Teaching by Rebecca J. Kreitzer](#)
- [Studies in Education Evaluation by Angela R. Linse](#)
- [Boring, Ottoboni & Stark 2016](#)
- [Mengel, Sauermann. & Zölitz. 2017](#)

Gram said he believes focusing on more extensive training for those who review SRT results is a key component in their effective use, and added that SRTs will undoubtedly continue to be used at the University. Shah noted that perhaps the focus should be on systematic bias, if it exists, rather than individual occurrences of random bias.

Kinsella listed three recommendations from the Women's Faculty Cabinet report:

- A multimodal approach to teaching evaluations is necessary
- Department leadership should be encouraged to use multi-year teaching narratives, throughout which a faculty member's growth and improvement, commitment to additional training, and dedication to the pedagogy can be viewed.
- When evaluating a faculty member's service, for those groups that have been identified to have received bias in the SRTs, consider recognizing the "unseen" effort it takes to work against those biases.

Nadathur asked the committee to consider the following for future discussions on the topic:

- Could the use of SRTs in teaching evaluation cause faculty to alter how they deliver course content in order to elicit high scores from students?
- Could that devalue the nature of the students' education?
- The importance of monitoring the evaluation process and those who are involved with it, including department heads and peer reviewers.

Gram added that the importance of SRTs is particularly critical for fixed term faculty (those who are not tenured or tenure-track) whose main job duty is teaching. If the SRTs are not accompanied by other modes of evaluation, he feels that a faculty member's effectiveness of teaching and curriculum development may not be receiving the respect and consideration that are due.

Rebecca Ropers asked for suggestions from the committee as to how to better educate faculty, department chairs/heads, and evaluators in the use of SRTs. She added that, in the past, when education events around how to best use SRTs were offered, attendance and interest were low. Committee members shared suggestions, including the following:

- Add this type of training to the onboarding of new department chairs/heads.
- Provide information to departmental promotion and tenure committees.
- Include information in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training.
- Revisit the emphasis placed on high SRT scores; perhaps reframe the language to say low SRT scores provide an opportunity for further training and discussion with the department chair or head.

Nadathur thanked Kinsella for joining the meeting, and added that, after further discussion with committee members, he would let her know if the committee chooses to endorse the WFT report.

3. Academic Freedom in the Absence of Tenure Protections

Nadathur next introduced Karen Miksch, associate professor, Higher Education & Law, College of Education and Human Development (CEHD). She began by referencing the [Academic Freedom and Responsibility 2011 White Paper](#) which was developed while she was co-chair of the AF&T. The paper was, in part, a response to the *Troubled Waters: A Mississippi Story* documentary discussion and subsequent amendments to the Board of Regents Policy: [Academic Freedom and Responsibility](#). The AF&T wanted to emphatically reiterate that all faculty, students, and staff have the protection and responsibilities associated with academic freedom.

Miksch explained that simply because a policy states that everyone has the same protection and responsibility associated with academic freedom does not mean that everyone has the equivalent ability to enact said protection and responsibility. She said her hope was that in today's discussion, she could assist the committee in generating ideas about how fixed term faculty can access the same degree of academic freedom protections held by tenure and tenure-track faculty. Nadathur asked Miksch if she knew why, in the 2011 White Paper, there had been such a limited discussion of protections provided for fixed term faculty as opposed to those available to tenured and tenure-track faculty. The embargo of the *Troubled Waters* film, Miksch explained, led to numerous discussions about what recourse an employee - especially a P&A employee - has when

they feel their academic freedom has been jeopardized. Miksch described the Troubled Waters controversy in some detail and some of the missteps involved. She noted that, given the misunderstandings that surfaced during the controversy, members of the AF&T better understood their obligation to provide information about academic freedom and responsibility on a broader scale at the University. Miksch also noted that a case study of non-tenured faculty members (*Departmental Cultures and Non-Tenure-Track Faculty: Willingness, Capacity, and Opportunity to Perform at Four-Year Institutions*, Kezar, 2013) found that being allowed to engage in departmental and campus-wide shared governance committees improved working conditions, including the ability of term faculty to enact their academic freedom and responsibility.

Committee members had a robust discussion regarding more recent situations in which the academic freedom of faculty is considered to have been compromised, including the 2019 Board of Regents (BOR) meeting at which the integrity of the work of the Task Force on Building Names and Institutional History was called into question.

Miksch summarized by saying it cannot be assumed that all University members know what academic freedom and responsibility means and whether or not it applies to them. Committee members then discussed wider distribution of information and training around academic freedom and responsibility and accompanying policies:

- Orientation for all new employees (faculty, P&A and civil service)
- Forums for employees who are not new to the University but who may not have received this type of training upon their arrival.
- Students, through a recommended syllabus statement:
 - *Academic freedom is a cornerstone of the University. Within the scope and content of the course as defined by the instructor, it includes the freedom to discuss relevant matters in the classroom. Along with this freedom comes responsibility. (Adapted from The American Association of University Professors "Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students")*
- Messaging to parents, constituent and community groups, the Board of Regents Office, and Office of the General Counsel

Miksch noted that a recommendation from the 2011 White Paper also stated that, in the future, similar situations must be referred to the Office of the Vice President and Provost for resolution.

In the interest of time, Nadathur thanked Miksch for joining the meeting and moved on to the final agenda topic.

4. Report from Panel Members on “*Making the Implicit Explicit*” Communications Plan
Committee members Karin Quick and Shah served on a panel that reviewed training modules around the University’s sexual harassment and misconduct policies. Shah said panel members were asked for their recommendations on the most effective way to include messaging from senior administration in the rollout of the training in March of 2021. The training is titled “*Making the Implicit Explicit*” and will be required training for all employees.

Nadathur said he would provide a document on which members could add comments and suggestions regarding today's discussion as well as what issues they would like to continue addressing in future meetings.

Hearing no further business, Nadathur thanked committee members and adjourned the meeting.

Geanette Poole
University Senate Office