

# **Revision History of the Spring 2022 Mason Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) Course Evaluation Form**

## **George Mason University Effective Teaching Committee**

As part of its charge as a university standing committee, the Effective Teaching Committee prepared a revised Course Evaluation form that was approved by the Faculty Senate for implementation in Spring of 2022. The revised form is the result of work conducted between 2014 and 2021 by eighteen faculty representing thirteen schools and programs from seven of the university's schools and colleges. The Committee's work has been informed by research into elements of effective teaching, as well as the purposes for which the form has been used. The Committee has revised the form to make it research-based, more useful to faculty for improving teaching, and fairer when used for the purposes of faculty evaluation (in support of Mason's 2014-2024 Strategic Plan Goal #9, Metric #4. Appendix 1).

We followed a rigorous development process, including (1) identifying elements of effective teaching; (2) revising course items; (3) obtaining feedback on the items from both faculty and students; (4) pilot testing the items; and (5) analyzing the results. We chose to undertake this development process for two reasons: 1) to ensure that the inferences made about teaching and the subsequent decisions based on those inferences are valid and can be supported by an instrument that adheres to measurement development principles; and 2) to protect all parties involved in a high-stakes evaluation process.

We developed new items based on a review of the literature on the uses of university student evaluations of teaching (SETs) for faculty evaluation with specific goals of increasing the validity and reliability of results. We also obtained faculty, administrator, and student input on indicators of effective teaching that matter to each group. We obtained feedback from all interested stakeholders by (1) conducting online surveys of students, program chairs, and instructional faculty; (2) holding focus groups with students and faculty from across the university; and (3) meeting with Program Chairs, Associate Provosts, the Provost, a college Dean, the Office of Digital Learning, the Faculty Senate Chair, the Faculty Senate, representatives of the Stearns Center for Teaching & Learning, and with the Director and staff of the Office for Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (OIEP).

We identified categories of effective teaching by reviewing the criteria for teaching excellence set forth by the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, criteria for genuine excellence in teaching set by the Provost's Office, and item databases used by other universities. The categories that were ultimately included in the revised Course Evaluation Form are: (1) student information, (2) student participation (3) learning outcomes, (4) course environment and experiences, and (5) instructor preparation and course organization. We also added several open-ended responses as requested by faculty, as well as sample optional questions on the use of technology by the course instructor. We encourage faculty to customize the form by adding items of their own choosing.

We included student information items on class level (e.g., first-year vs. doctoral student), whether or not the course is required, the delivery format, self-reported information on

absences from class, hours the student spent preparing for class, and expected final grade in the course. We included these self-reported items because the research shows that student ratings of faculty, as well as online response rates, can be highly correlated with some or all of these student and course characteristics.

We removed two items from the current form, Items 15 & 16, which ask for overall ratings of the teaching and of the course, respectively. These items, which in many schools and colleges across the university have become the only items out of the current twenty-three that are considered in decisions regarding teaching effectiveness for the purposes of annual evaluation, contract renewal, tenure, and promotion, were removed for several reasons. First, research on using these types of items suggests that they do not result in objective measures of teaching effectiveness and may lend themselves to gender and racial bias, as well as to bias based on grade expectations. Students may assign lower ratings to females and instructors of color and when they anticipate getting a final grade with which they do not agree. Grading leniency often leads to favorable ratings but may not lead to successful student performance in follow-on courses. Part-time instructors are particularly vulnerable to grade inflation due to the high-stakes nature of the evaluation forms. In addition, these items tend to be influenced by student satisfaction with an instructor without regard to any particular aspect of instruction, making the items susceptible to a variety of biases. Finally, these items offer no useful information to instructors for improving their teaching. By removing the bias inherent in using an overall rating for high-stakes evaluation, Mason can improve the accuracy and fairness of faculty evaluations and improve retention of minority and female faculty (in support of Mason's Strategic Goal #8, Metric #1, Appendix 1).

In May 2018, we pilot-tested a revised Course Evaluation Form in twenty-five online courses with almost 400 students in eight colleges or schools. Face-to-face courses were not included in the pilot-testing per direction of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (OIEP). Based on the results of the pilot test, we removed items determined to be redundant or unclear and reduced the number of items on the form to twenty Likert scale items (three less than the current form). An exploratory factor analysis on the items indicated a single factor (except for Items 7 & 8 on student participation), which we take as evidence of the construct validity of the revised form.

In preparing to use the new form, course instructors should be informed that a new Course Evaluation Form has been designed with its primary focus being to measure aspects of teaching effectiveness. The proposed form has been revised over four years of research and development, with a specific focus on stakeholder relevance (e.g., Mason faculty, deans/directors, and students). Following this Committee's recommendations regarding how the form should be used, the University will ensure that the form serves primarily as a tool for improving teaching, with a secondary goal being accountability as one of multiple measures used for evaluation.

Since the new Course Evaluation Form is a departure from the current form, we suggest a university-wide discussion on the purposes for using the form, in light of research on its limitations and lack of reliability for summative purposes. Under no condition should the results

of the Course Evaluation Form be used as a single indicator of teaching effectiveness. In every case where teaching is being evaluated, multiple measures should be used. This Committee has prepared a robust set of policy recommendations for faculty evaluation, including the use of this or any course evaluation form, which will be released as a separate document.

## Appendix 1. Relevant excerpts from the George Mason University 2014-2024 Strategic Plan

### Goal 8: Diverse Academic Community

Create an inclusive and diverse academic community that reflects the diversity of the National Capital Region.

#### Initiatives

- >>Recruit, retain, and advance diverse faculty across disciplines and ranks.
- >>Build a diverse administration and staff.
- >>Promote an organizational culture where diverse members of our community can thrive.

#### Metric 1

*Diversity, one of our foundational values, is a key element in the Mason IDEA (innovative, diverse, entrepreneurial, accessible), which defines who we are as a community. We believe that a diversity of opinions, cultures, and perspectives is what provides vibrancy to an academic community. Diversity is a source of innovation, energy, and growth. For us, “diversity is our strength.”*

### Goal 9: Support Teaching and Scholarship Excellence

Provide an environment and resources to support and encourage academic innovation and excellence.

#### Initiatives

- >>Reward and promote innovation and excellence in scholarship, teaching, and global and community engagement.
- >>Create flexibility in faculty roles and rewards to support strategic plan initiatives.
- >>Improve support and infrastructure for innovation and excellence in teaching and scholarship.

#### Metric 4

*First, we will focus on faculty development as a core priority. We will expand our opportunities for faculty to develop expertise in online education delivery, experiential learning techniques, and other pedagogical best practices. Distance learning, flipped classrooms, and other innovations require thoughtful examination of teaching methods and learning outcomes, which will need to be explored and evaluated. Finally, we will improve flexibility in faculty roles to ensure our commitment to developing a faculty body that can provide our students with transformational, innovative learning experiences while expanding our commitment to scholarship.*

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