2014-2015 Report of the Portland State University Task Force on Academic Quality (TAQ)

Virginia Butler (Anthropology, CLAS)
Annabelle Dolidon (World Languages and Literatures, CLAS)
Linda George (Environmental Sciences and Management, CLAS)
Christian Grand, (Associated Students of PSU, Senator), replaced by Eric Noll (Associated Students of PSU, President, April 2015)
Karen Karavanic  (Computer Science, Engineering & Computer Science)
Kathi Ketcheson (Institutional Research & Planning, Presidents Office)
Yves Labissiere (UNST, Interim Director)
Scott Marshall (Vice Provost for Academic and Fiscal Planning, OAA & Interim Dean, School of Business Administration)
Alan MacCormack  (UNST faculty, AAUP representative)
Todd Rosenstiel (Biology, CLAS)
Vivek Shandas (Urban Studies & Planning, Urban & Public Affairs)
Angela Strecker (Environmental Sciences & Management, CLAS)

I. Introduction

To address concerns that the quality of our worklife needed to be considered along with the quantifiable markers of achievement (e.g., enrollment numbers, grants obtained, papers published, number of community partnerships), a Task Force on Academic Quality was formed in December 2014, through a joint resolution of Faculty Senate and AAUP[1]. Our Task Force, which includes seven tenure-line faculty, one AAUP representative (NTTF), three administrators, and one student, first convened in mid-January 2015 and has met approximately weekly since then.

From January to June 2015, our time has been devoted to: discussion and interpretation of our charge and goals; creation, dissemination, and analysis of a campus survey regarding academic quality; and development of a roadmap for future work by TAQ. In this report, we discuss each of these efforts, and offer our suggestions for the future work of the Task Force.

II. Formation of TAQ

- brief description of 2011 effort [2]
- brief description of 2014 charge [1][3]

III. Discussion and Interpretation of our Charge

At our initial meetings, we discussed at length our charge—in what ways could we contribute to campus discussions, including direction and new policies regarding “Academic Quality” (AQ)? Presiding Officer of Senate, Bob Liebman, and Executive Director of AAUP, Phil Lesch came to our meeting to share their suggestions about near and long-term goals. As outlined in the Senate Resolution, one goal of the Task Force was to identify “aspirational comparators” that could be used to address issues of AQ at PSU.

The term “comparator” is generally associated with identifying similar institutional characteristics (public/private, urban/rural, etc.) for the purposes of comparing salary structure and student demographics. Our group decided that for the purpose of identifying
aspirational comparators of AQ it would be more productive to identify aspirational practices - independent of institution type - that promote AQ. A working definition of an aspirational comparator for our group is an institution that implements aspirational practices.

Our group decided that to identify aspirational comparators, we needed to develop a clearer definition of AQ. This led to the idea of a campus wide survey, described in detail in the following section.

IV. Campus Survey

The Task Force felt that our task would be helped by soliciting ideas from the campus community at large. Besides particular insights from the community, we thought that, if our long-term goal was to improve AQ at PSU, a participatory, “bottom-up” approach to engaging the university community was essential; and an on-line survey was the most efficient way to get the greatest participation. We designed our survey to obtain perceptions about AQ for the three core areas of University activity -- research, teaching, and service -- from faculty, academic professionals, and administrators. Although initially we thought to include students in our survey, we decided that soliciting this valuable form of input would require a different approach that fell outside of the scope of our initial five-month window for results. The survey (see Figure 1), created in Qualtrics and administered by OIRP (under Dr. Kathi Ketcheson’s supervision), was e-mailed on March 3, 2015 and was open for responses until March 17.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>What do you think represents academic quality in:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teaching/student experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research/Scholarly Work:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Please list up to five colleges or universities that you feel embody or support these characteristics and suggest why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>If we could institute changes at PSU to improve academic quality, say over the next 5 years, what general and specific elements could you recommend, in regards to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching/student experience:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research/Scholarly Work:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Please share any additional comments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: TAQ Survey March 2015

The response rate was extremely high (see Table 1). Out of 2597 surveys distributed across campus, 392 individuals provided responses to the questions, which represent an overall return rate of 15%. The highest proportion of respondents was Tenure-line faculty (30%) and Administrators (25%). The high rate of participation indicates the extent that the PSU community is concerned about Academic Quality; and suggests their interest in developing actions/activities to promote quality in our long-term planning and initiatives.
Table 1. Frequency of responses to Academic Quality Survey by job category, March 2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th># SENT</th>
<th># COMPLETED (excludes partial records)</th>
<th>% response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenure-line</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FT Fixed Instructional</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Professional</td>
<td>682</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2,597</td>
<td>392</td>
<td><strong>15%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Per the 2014 Senate Resolution, PSU administration (Provost Andrews’ office) provided funds to hire one half-time graduate research assistant experienced in qualitative research to synthesize the responses. Our GRA began work the week of April 6, 2015.

Interpretation and use of the survey requires careful consideration of these factors:

- Choice of specific representative institutions might be greatly influenced by the knowledge of specific institutions gained by: direct attendance, previous employment, attendance of a family member or friend, prior or current collaborative activities, field of expertise, and/or advertising materials; and
- Knowledge of a broader or narrower range of institutions might be influenced by job category at PSU (e.g., faculty, administrative, academic professional).
- Given the wide range of quality normally found within an individual institution, that might include some renowned programs or departments, some average, etc., it would be misleading to conclude that any institution mentioned embodied Academic Quality in all aspects.
- For these reasons and as discussed previously in relation to aspirational practices, we decided to place at least equal consideration on the specific characteristics mentioned as Aspirational Practices, in addition to the listing of specific institutions. This would address the likelihood that the list of institutions embodying the characteristics of Quality is larger than the list directly cited by survey participants.
The survey responses will require several more months of review to draw any firm conclusions. Even in this early phase of analysis, we are seeing some interesting trends that suggest the survey's value in helping us understand campus perceptions about AQ. For example, in response to the first question, "What do you think represents academic quality in Teaching/student experience," respondents listed ~25 different ideas, but these seven concepts were noted repeatedly across all job categories:

- Faculty need to stay current with trends in their field and provide relevant instructional materials.
- Faculty need to encourage students to ask questions and be engaged, getting them to think beyond their comfort zone.
- Classes should provide opportunities for students to engage with the community.
- Classes should connect concepts from classroom discussion with real-world events and problems.
- Teachers have a passion for their subject.
- Teaching needs to be evaluated by peers and not only student evaluations.
- Smaller class sizes—which gives instructors a greater chance to give feedback on writing.

These ideas include relatively specific practices (small class size, new approach to teacher evaluation) and more abstract concepts (engaged and impassioned teaching). In future analysis and conceptualizing our task, we suggest it will be important to distinguish indicators of quality (e.g., Student learning, Achievements, Competence in some way, classroom environment) from practices that may promote quality (e.g., small class size, community partnerships). Future work will develop a comprehensive list of respondent views of AQ (for research, service, and teaching); that could then form the basis of a future campus survey, with more directed questions including priorities. These themes suggest areas of AQ the Task Force will want to explore in more detail in the 2015-2016 academic year, as we explain below.

V. Roadmap

In May 2015 we requested that the PSU Faculty Senate Steering Committee extend the charge of TAQ through the 2015-2016 academic year. The key elements of the roadmap are:

- Complete qualitative analysis of the campus-wide survey.
- Determine an initial set of specific indicators of AQ, 5-8 examples. These will be identified from the spring 2015 survey and a more directed campus-wide survey (launched perhaps Winter 2016) that will help us prioritize concepts/goals about AQ.
- Our focus again is on aspirational practices, rather than aspirational comparator institutions.
- We would develop for each aspirational indicator, a quantifiable metric to compare our current (baseline) score to our future goal.
- We would identify institutions that have been successful in the selected practices.
- With the results of the survey, we could do targeted case studies (purposive sampling) of the other institutions we will have identified, in order to examine those practices that engender academic quality.
• We would then discuss resources and practices (at PSU) that might serve to advance or block the achievement of our aspirational practices.
• Discuss scalable and affordable means of soliciting student input
  o Start with summarizing data that PSU already collects on student views/perceptions of AQ.
• Develop guidelines for the creation of a standing committee on Academic Quality that would continue beyond 2015-2016 academic year.
  o Serve as resource for administrative requests
  o Serve as liaison-resource to relevant committees and Task Forces, e.g. Program Prioritization
  o Monitor progress towards aspirational qualities at a broad University level
  o Translate goals into specific resource requests
  o Report annually to the PSU Board of Trustees

[1] 2014 PSU Faculty Senate Resolution on Academic Quality, available at: **
** [https://www.pdx.edu/faculty-senate/task-force-on-academic-quality](https://www.pdx.edu/faculty-senate/task-force-on-academic-quality)