General Faculties Council
Committee on the Learning Environment
Open Session Minutes

Wednesday, November 04, 2015
2-31 South Academic Building (SAB)
2:00 PM - 4:00 PM

ATTENDEES:

Voting Members:

Sarah Forgie	Member, Vice-Provost (Learning Initiatives) and Chair, GFC CLE
Gerald Beasley	Member, Vice-Provost and Chief Librarian
Shannon Erichsen	Member, Support staff representative (Category B1.0), elected by GFC
Roger Graves	Member, Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning
Jacqueline Leighton	Member, Chair Representative, selected by Chairs' Council
Glen Loppnow	Member, Associate Dean or Associate Chair, Teaching and Learning (or equivalent)
Luis Marin	Member, Graduate Student at-Large
Fahim Rahman	Member, Vice-President (Academic), Students' Union
Jeff Rawlings	Member (Delegate), Vice-Provost and Associate Vice-President of Information Technology
Norma Rodenburg	Member (Delegate), Vice-Provost and University Registrar or Delegate
Toni Samek	Member, Major Teaching Award Recipient, Staff Representative
Sarah Stahlke	Member, Academic staff member (Category A1.0)* and currently a member of GFC
Mani Vaidyanathan	Member, Academic Staff
Stanley Varnhagen	Member, Academic Staff

Staff:
Meg Brolley, Coordinator, GFC Committee on the Learning Environment
Andrea Patrick, scribe

OPENING SESSION

1.   Approval of the Agenda

Materials before members are contained in the official meeting file.

Motion: Rawlins/Beasley

THAT the GFC Committee on the Learning Environment approve the Agenda.
CARRIED

2.   Approval of the Open Session Minutes of October 7, 2015

Materials before members are contained in the official meeting file.

Motion: Loppnow/Rahman

THAT the GFC Committee on the Learning Environment approve the Minutes of October 7, 2015.
CARRIED

3.   Comments from the Chair

The Chair commented on a number of relevant items to members.

DISCUSSION ITEMS

4.   Centre for Teaching and Learning: Update

There were no documents.

Presenter: Roger Graves, Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL)

Discussion:
Dr Graves provided the following updates in regards to activities hosted by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL):

Creating Learning Outcomes
Nov 3, 2015 10:30 AM - 11:50 AM
Cameron B-12

McCalla Professorships Information Session for Small Faculties
Nov 3, 2015 3:30 PM - 4:30 PM
Room 2-15 South Academic Building (SAB)

Duty to Accommodate: The role of UofA's instructional employees, support staff and students in providing exam accommodations
Nov 4, 2015 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM
Cameron B-12

TLEF Information Session
Nov 10, 2015 1:00 PM - 2:30 PM
2-31 South Academic Building (SAB)

Assessment of Student Learning
Nov 17, 2015 10:30 AM - 11:50 AM
Cameron B-12

Facilitating Engaging Discussions
Nov 19, 2015 10:30 AM - 11:50 AM
Cameron B-12

Assessment quality. How to utilize eClass statistics to improve your quizzes

Nov 26, 2015 10:30 AM - 11:50 AM
Cameron B-12

CATALYSTS - Balancing Home and Profession

Nov 27, 2015 2:30 PM - 3:30 PM
Central Academic Building (CAB) 2-69

As well, Dr Graves also provided commentary surrounding a possible initiative aimed at creating professional designations for professors, which would count towards FEC.

A member noted that in regards to awards, Faculties often have earlier submissions deadlines, and that it would be useful for CTL to also make note of this. A member enquired as to how the video room could be booked, and Dr Graves reported that once the room is functional, a process will be established and communicated to members of the community.

5.   Report on Evaluation of Online Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI)

Materials before members are contained in the official meeting file.

Presenter: Scott Delinger, Director, Research Computing, Information Services & Technology (IST)

Purpose of the Proposal: To report on the transition of USRIs from paper to electronic based methods.

Discussion:
Dr Delinger provided members with an overview of the Report on Evaluation of Online Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI), adding that this project was frequently discussed at GFC CLE during its development. He reported that this project was initiated in 2013 in the form of a pilot project, offering online USRIs for select face-to-face classes. He explained that the results of this pilot mirrored literature with scores being comparable to those of paper-and-pencil USRIs, but completion rates being lower.

Dr Delinger reported that following the approval of modifications to the GFC Policy Manual Section 111.3 by General Faculties Council in September of 2014, IST implemented the electronic USRI campus-wide.

In regards to the findings, Dr Delinger explained that response rates in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science declined, although he noted that this aligns with data reported by the University of British Columbia which experienced a larger drop in response rate than that experienced at UofA. He reported that some courses within the Faculty of Arts set aside time in class for students to complete the online questionnaire to maintain response rates. The Faculty of Engineering found a greater response and longer answers to the long form questions with the electronic format. He pointed out that in the electronic format, there were fewer personal remarks about instructors, although he noted that any threats are promptly investigated.

During the discussion, Dr Delinger confirmed that this represents summative assessments at the end of the term but noted that the electronic format would allow for formative use by instructors mid-term.

In regards to the response rates and how declines are being addressed, Dr Delinger replied that the 15% drop was consistent within the pilot as well as the actual implementation, and that other institutions have seen larger drops. He noted that some departments are providing students with in-class time to complete the questionnaires, and that some instructors are explaining the importance of USRIs to students.

A member expressed concern that the response rate decline could escalate, and noted that in his opinion, it is awkward for instructors to talk about USRIs with students. He noted that emails encouraging instructors to discuss this with students are not effective.

Regarding the results of the survey following the pilot, Dr Delinger noted that it was retracted because a lack of Ethics approval.

On the topic of past practice of Faculties transcribing written responses provided on questionnaires, Dr Delinger explained that there were concerns about the high costs involved in continuing to do this, and that the electronic format allows students to provide comments. A member noted that the electronic USRI was a direct tool to address the significant workload of support staff who were transcribing handwritten comments. As well, he stated that the electronic version eliminates the need for costly scanners and paper. He emphasized that he does not anticipate that response rates will slide significantly lower in the future.

A member commented that the timing of the electronic USRI was of concern for students as receiving the email reminders near the end of the term, when students are the most busy, is not effective. The member also noted that there is concern from the student perspective of providing feedback which could be tied back to the student.

A member pointed out that instructors who teach online courses prefer the electronic USRI as it provides parity of experience for online students with on campus students.

In regards to next steps, as well as methods to continue to reach out to students on this subject, Dr Delinger replied that IST will continue to collect the response data each term.

It was noted that the use of USRI is challenging as it is being used for multiple goals including, but not limited to, faculty evaluation. A member noted that although there are benefits and drawbacks to the USRI, especially in relation to the variable ways they are measured by each individual FEC, that an online format seems to promise beneficial solutions going forward.

It was noted that the electronic based format provided more access for students to complete the USRI; in the past, students who did not attend class on that specific day were unable to complete the USRI.

It was also noted that it was too early in the transition process to understand the impact to response rates and that further data was necessary to understand the long term impact. IST will submit a further report on this next fall.

A member suggested that the committee's discussion be conveyed to GFC Executive with this report.

The Chair confirmed that this will be done, and thanked members for their commentary.

6.   Draft Template

Materials before members are contained in the official meeting file.

Presenter: Sarah Forgie, Vice-Provost (Learning Initiatives) and Chair, GFC Committee on the Learning Environment (CLE)

Purpose of the Proposal: To discuss a template members could utilize to list and rank potential topics for action and/or discussion at GFC CLE.

Discussion:
The Chair distributed a draft copy of template intended to guide members towards providing potential topics for GFC CLE to consider. She invited members to comment on the template.

A member emphasized that topics must be specific, but generic enough to be transferable across units.

In regards to timelines, a member noted that some discussions will span the course of several meetings, and that the Committee must come up with concrete conclusions following their review.

A member stated that the template could be used strategically, to identify themes which members could then prioritize. In relation to this suggestion, a member added that as a GFC Standing Committee, the initiatives must fall within GFC's mandate.

The Chair thanked members for their thoughtful discussion and reminded them to provide their suggestions on the template for the next meeting.

7.   Question Period

There were no questions.

INFORMATION REPORTS

8.   Items Approved by the Committee by email Ballet

There were no items.

9.   Information Items Forwarded to Committee Members Between Meetings

There were no items.

CLOSING SESSION

10.   Adjournment

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 3:25 p.m.