New system said to provide better data on courses

The head of Auburn’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment says initial results for a new, more thorough system for student evaluations of their classes look promising for faculty members and for the university as a whole.

Acting on recommendations from a faculty committee and the University Senate, Auburn implemented Instructional Assessment System surveys university-wide in fall semester in the first stage of a three-year test of the new system.

The system, which was developed at the University of Washington, has several questions that apply to all courses and others that are tailored for each of 13 different teaching situations in the university’s schools and colleges. The choice of instrument varies according to type of teaching method for the course and whether the material is taught in small or large classes or labs.

AU surveyed 2,840 classes and sections last fall and had a return rate of 67 percent, 67,594 individual forms. Drew Clark, director of Institutional Research and Assessment, said the high response rate should help ensure that the results accurately represent the attitudes of Auburn students toward their classes and the faculty teaching them.

On a six-point scale from 0 for poor to 5 for excellent, Auburn students gave their courses an average score of 3.9, very good, for effectiveness. Nearly half, 1,390, of all course sections in the evaluation received an overall rating of at least 4, very good, and only seven sections received overall ratings of poor or very poor.

While noting that the survey is limited to the perspective of students, Clark said these results will be part of a broader evaluation within the academic departments. “A considerable amount of research has shown that well-constructed, well-conducted
AU hosting conference on diabetes

Auburn will host its first Boshell Diabetes Research Day, featuring some of the nation’s top diabetes researchers, on Friday at the AU Hotel.

“We are bringing together experts from around the United States to present the latest research related to diabetes and the role of obesity in its development,” said Robert Judd, the Boshell Chair in Diabetes and Metabolic Diseases at AU’s College of Veterinary Medicine. “We will have oral presentations and scientific posters from a number of Auburn faculty as well as from other institutions, including UAB and Vanderbilt.”

Philip E. Scherer, director of the Touchstone Diabetes Center at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, will present the keynote address at 10 a.m. Philip Wood, director of the division of genomics at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, will speak on obesity-related diseases and Type 2 diabetes during a banquet at 6:30 p.m. Judd noted that diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in the United States.

Auburn’s Boshell Diabetes and Metabolic Diseases Research Program, with 21 faculty, honors the late Bursi R. Boshell, a 1947 AU agriculture graduate who attended the AU veterinary college for two years before transferring to Harvard Medical School. Boshell served on the faculty of the University of Alabama at Birmingham Medical Center and was instrumental in establishing its Diabetes Research and Education Hospital. He also launched the Boshell Diabetes and Endocrine Center in Birmingham.

Course evaluations continued from page 1

surveys of students produce results that closely track self-evaluations by faculty and by their peers,” said Clark.

Clark said individuals and department heads can use data specific to each type of course to improve teaching and course content, and, over a period of time, deans and the provost can use data from the broader questions for academic planning.

Jim Groccia, director of AU’s Biggio Center for Teaching, and Learning, assisted the University Senate’s Teaching Effectiveness Committee during a nearly three-year search for and development of AU’s more-accurate evaluation instrument.

“The University of Washington has used the IAS instruments for more than 30 years and established a track record of producing reliable, valid results with it,” he added.

Having worked with a variation of the IAS instrument for eight years at the University of Missouri, Groccia said the system had widespread support and very few complaints from faculty at that institution.

Groccia said it is too early to tell if the new instrument will produce the same results, but the goal is the same. “We expect to gather additional and more-accurate information that individual faculty members can use to enhance the quality of their teaching, and department heads can use in making sound administrative decisions,” he added.

“The key element is that by using a better instrument, we can collect better data, which should help us to enhance teaching on an individual basis and across the university.”

Investigation

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“We are so saddened by this situation, words simply aren’t adequate,” said AU President Jay Gogue.

“This is a close-knit community that rarely experiences such a tragedy, so our heartfelt prayers and thoughts go out to those in Lauren’s community in Marietta, and especially to her family.

Offering condolences to the family, Auburn Mayor Bill Ham added, “Auburn University is intrinsically linked to the City of Auburn. Their triumphs are our triumphs and in this instance, their tragedy is our tragedy.”

Lauren’s father, James Burk, said, “The Burk family was so proud to have Lauren as an Auburn University student. We want to extend our deepest gratitude and appreciation to Auburn University, the City of Auburn, and the Auburn Police Department. We feel very close to your community. We appreciate what everyone is doing for us and Lauren.”

Anyone with information that may help in the case is asked to call the Auburn Police Division’s tip line at 301-7337 or the detective section at 301-3140. News updates are posted online at the university’s Web site, www.auburn.edu.

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Author of books on Supreme Court

Political scientist sees lasting impact on U.S. courts from Bush presidency

President George W. Bush has seen his popularity sink to unprecedented levels for the modern era since winning the 2004 election, but political observers should not be too hasty to write off his presidency as a failure, says an AU authority on American government.

Ted Becker, author of several books on major political struggles, says Bush may have more long-range impact on the nation than many other presidents. Becker predicts that Bush’s long-term impact on the nation will come through his two Supreme Court appointments during his second term, with another one possible in his final months in office.

One of Bush’s premiere objectives as president was to lock in a federal judiciary that would protect “conservative interests” no matter who controls Congress and the presidency over the next generation.

“The next president is going to have to inherit the Iraq War, an economic calamity and a dysfunctional government,” said Becker. “But long after this war and these problems are in the history books, the nation will feel the impact of Bush’s two, and maybe three, appointments to the Supreme Court.”

He explained, “Presidents can only control the government directly for four or eight years, but they can influence the direction of government for a generation or more through their appointments to all federal courts, especially the Supreme Court.”

A member of the Political Science Department in AU’s College of Liberal Arts since 1988, Becker has been a leading scholar of the federal courts and the presidency, as well as other aspects of American government, for more than four decades. His books include “The Impact of Supreme Court Decisions” and “Government Lawlessness in America,” both published by Oxford University Press, and “American Government: Past, Present, Future.”

The ascendance of an extremely conservative judiciary was no accident of history, Becker said. “It was the intent of the Federalist founding fathers to make the Constitution what the Supreme Court interpreted it to be, and, from the way they set it up, they knew that it would be the least democratic branch of the United States government, and therefore the most conservative.”

Citing the court’s history, Becker said there was only a single prolonged “liberal” period of the Supreme Court, extending from Roosevelt’s New Deal through the presidency of Lyndon Johnson. During that 40-year span in the middle of the 20th century, the court made many major “liberal” decisions, such as enabling desegregation, expanding the rights of criminal defendants and ruling that anti-abortion laws are unconstitutional.

Becker said these and similar decisions were directly responsible for a “conservative” resurgence that began with the presidency of Ronald Reagan in 1980. “Perhaps the central goal of American conservatism since then has been to change the composition of the Supreme Court to restore it to its traditional ‘conservative’ stance,” he said.

Through the appointment of John Roberts as chief justice and Samuel Alito to the court early in his second term, Bush created a solid and relatively youthful majority of conservative jurists on the court, completing the reversal that began in 1986 under Reagan, with his appointment of William Rehnquist as chief justice. George W. Bush has also appointed conservative judges to dozens of lower court positions, and the political effects will endure long after he has left office.

“Reagan started a process that George W. Bush completed in his second term.”

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“The National Science Foundation and NASA each recently awarded competitive grants to Pradeep Lall of AU’s Samuel Ginn College of Engineering. Lall, the Thomas Walter professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering and associate director of the Center for Advanced Vehicle Electronics, will use the grants for research in integrated vehicle health electronics.

The NASA grant of $450,000 for three years will support Lall’s work in integrated vehicle health monitoring. That study focuses on indicators of potential system failure.

The NSF award is a one-year $50,000 grant in the area of health monitoring of implantable biological electronic devices. The research focuses on the development of methodologies for pace-makers and implantable defibrillators.

Lall has garnered several awards for research in fields related to prognostics and health monitoring and has published extensively in journals. He also gave a keynote address on prognostics at the EuroSIME’07 Conference in London.

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