New Brunswick Faculty Council Executive Committee
Response to the “Proposal to Improve the Evaluation of Teaching at Rutgers University”

The New Brunswick Faculty Council (NBFC) has long been concerned with improving teaching at Rutgers and has sponsored a long series of Teaching Conferences for that purpose. The most recent Conference on October 27, 2017 was dedicated to a consideration of the “Proposal to Improve the Evaluation of Teaching at Rutgers University” prepared by the Task Force on Evaluating Teaching appointed by Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Barbara Lee. The report on the Teaching Conference provides a framework for the NBFC to respond to the proposal from the Task Force (hereafter called simply the Proposal). Given that the next meeting of the NBFC is scheduled for late January, and that Vice President Lee has asked for responses much sooner, the NBFC Executive Committee is pleased to provide a preliminary response based on the Teaching Conference report and discussions that have taken place in meetings of some of the committees of the Council. In general, the Executive Committee endorses the conclusions and recommendations of the report on the Conference.

Both the Proposal and the report on the Teaching Conference focused primarily on the following areas.

1. Student Evaluation of Teaching
2. Peer Evaluation of Teaching
3. Implementation Schedule

1. Student Evaluation of Teaching

A large majority of all faculty members who have discussed this topic strongly advised that SIRS or other forms of student evaluation of teaching not be part of any personnel actions. In addition to their unreliability, uncertainties about what they actually measure; and their gender, ethnic, and disciplinary biases; their negative effects on the academic community were advanced as arguments against their use.

Despite the belief that student evaluations of teaching should not be used in summative evaluations of teaching for reappointment, promotion or tenure, members of the Executive Committee (EC) believe that properly formulated student evaluations of courses and teachers can provide very useful feedback to individual faculty members. In order for student evaluations to be of most help to teachers, the current SIRS survey instrument needs to undergo a major redesign to provide more focused in-depth information about both courses and instructors. The procedures for administering the survey also need to be changed to ensure close to 100% participation. The two suggested yes or no survey questions given in the Proposal appear to be unacceptable to everyone.
2. Peer Evaluation of Teaching
   a. Classroom Observations

   Classroom observations by peers can provide very useful information provided they are very
   carefully structured. The observers must be free of personal or intellectual biases either for or
   against the faculty member being evaluated. There must be very clearly formulated standards
   of classroom teaching in areas such as level of preparation, mastery of the material,
   intellectual rigor, engagement with the students, and enthusiasm upon which the observer
   must report. The faculty member who is observed should have the opportunity to add to the
   reports of the peer observers.

   The use of peer observations is one area in which the Executive Committee disagrees
   somewhat with the recommendations of the Teaching Conference report. While we agree
   that peer observations should be used primarily for formative evaluations, we believe they
   also have a role to play in summative evaluations of teaching for reappointment, promotion,
   and tenure.

   b. Teaching Portfolios

   While a teaching portfolio in and of itself is not an evaluative tool, it is a mechanism for the
   faculty member who is being evaluated to provide critical information to his or her
   evaluators. Accordingly, very detailed guidance about the form and content of the portfolio
   must be provided to the preparer. Very detailed guidance must likewise be provided to those
   who will evaluate the teaching portfolio.

   c. Frequency of Evaluations

   The frequency of evaluations suggested in the Proposal seems reasonable for tenured, tenure-
   track, and NTT faculty but the suggestion that PTLs be evaluated in every course every
   semester would be quite burdensome for both departments and PTLs. We suggest that the
   frequency of evaluation for PTLs should be determined by the number of previous
   satisfactory evaluations.

3. Implementation Schedule

   Given the complexities associated with various aspects of the Proposal, the proposed
   implementation schedule is too ambitious to be practical. A substantial amount of time and effort
   will be required to develop appropriate standards and procedures for peer observation and
   evaluation of teaching portfolios. Rushing this process may result in seriously flawed evaluation
   plans for many departments. The Bloustein School and SMLR are developing pilot evaluation
   protocols. Departments should not be asked to submit their teaching evaluation plans before the
   pilot protocols have been developed and made available to other schools and departments.

   The NBFC expects to submit a more detailed and concrete response early in the spring semester after
   the full Council has had a chance to discuss the Proposal in depth.