**MEMO**

Date: November 15th, 2010

From: Faculty Evaluation Procedures Committee

To: Bentley University Students, Chairs, and Deans

RE: Use of the new on-line course evaluation instrument

In the spring of 2010, Bentley University replaced its old course evaluation instrument with a new one. This new instrument was designed with extensive research on how students learn, how students evaluation instructors, and input from Bentley faculty, chairs, and deans. This memo is designed to explain some of the major changes, and to assist users in interpreting the data.

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are filled out by students at the end of each course they take. The old version contained two parts. Both were filled out on paper, in class. The new version has a single part that is filled out online.

The Committee’s research into best practices in SET construction shows that SETs are useful only if students are asked questions that they can be expected to know the answers to, that are about the instructor, and that ask for specific information about the instructor. Thus the new instrument does not ask students to evaluate the instructor’s knowledge of the subject area (students do not know this), to evaluate the course content (this is not a question about the instructor), or to give their overall impression of the instructor (the basis for the evaluation is unclear). Research also indicates that results from SETs are more accurate if biasing variables are removed. Thus the new instrument does not ask students about the difficulty of the course, or the grade they expect to receive in it (these are irrelevant to, e.g., the instructor’s ability to convey information clearly).

As you consider an instructor’s SETs, it is important to keep in mind the following:

1. The new survey is designed to elicit students’ evaluations of the instructor *only*. The first four questions ask students to evaluate the instructor’s *facilitation of learning* (i.e., the extent to which the instructor has effectively communicated the course material, *whatever it is*, to students). The second four questions ask students to evaluate the instructor’s *interaction with students* (i.e., the extent to which the instructor has actively engaged students in the learning process). Beyond this, the committee believes the questions speak for themselves.

2. There is no question that can be understood as an “overall” evaluation of the instructor. The questions ask students to evaluate particular aspects of the instructor’s facilitation of learning and interaction with students. In our judgment, there is no single most important aspect of instruction, and so no single most important question on the new SETs.

3. As implied by points (1) and (2), the new survey instrument is *not* designed to elicit students’ evaluations of the *course as a whole*, and in particular, the course’s content or subject matter. Should departments wish to evaluate a course as whole, including its content, they must use different means.

4. The old surveys used a scale of 1 – 5; the new ones use a scale of 1 – 6. Our research indicates that giving students a modestly wider range of choices results in less “bunching” of evaluations (e.g., around the number 3). We do not think it is appropriate to try to “translate” a number from the old survey into a number on the new survey. For example, the old 4 should not be understood as the new 5. The new results should be looked at on their own terms.

5. The new surveys report both the medians and means of students’ responses. The mean is the average: the numerical sum of students’ responses (X1 + X2+ . . . Xn) divided by the total number of student responses (n). The median is the middle number in a distribution arranged in numerical order. It is the number separating the top half of the distribution from the bottom half. (In a sample with many of the same values (e.g., many 4’s), the median number may be repeated in both the top and bottom half of the distribution.) As is well-known, extreme values (e.g., 1’s) can have a significant effect on the mean. Medians, therefore, may be a more accurate as a measure of students’ perceptions of instructor performance.

6. Student evaluations of instructors on SETs should be just *one* part of the overall evaluation of instructors. Peer evaluations of teaching (i.e., evaluations of the instructor’s teaching by other instructors) and teaching portfolio (e.g., syllabuses, assignments, examinations, etc.) analyses are also important.

The Faculty Evaluation Procedures Committee welcomes questions and comments about the new SETS.