The Academic Senate has completed its review of the proposal for Online Delivery of Course Evaluations. Several groups were able to provide substantive comments and suggestions including: Committee on Academic Personnel (CAP), Undergraduate Council (UgC), Graduate Council (GC), Council on Research and Instructional Resources (CRIR), Council on Planning and Budget (CPB), Council on Faculty issues and Awards (CFIA), and the Faculty Executive Committees (FEC's) from L&S, Engineering, and Creative Studies.

All groups believe there is value in working on an online evaluation tool and there is support for the rationale of the project. Groups cited the ease of administration, savings of staff time, tighter security, more legible comments from students, organizing narrative comments in a single file, and saving many reams of paper. At the same time, there are serious questions and concerns such that the Senate recommends the project proceed more slowly, have a true pilot period that could test the quality of an online system and involve faculty members from UgC, GC and CAP in developing the pilot. In addition, it is critical to involve lecturers in any pilot about online delivery of ESCI given that their personnel cases rely solely on their teaching. The COE FEC recommends the use of a “rigorous pilot of the proposed program, for example by using the new system in a few large courses whose syllabi and instructors have remained stable for several years, in order to investigate the effect of the change on ESCI results.”

Decisions about the Campus-wide implementation of a new evaluation system should be contingent on the outcome of the pilot. CRIR notes: “we are uneasy about the idea of the online ESCI system as proposed. This change in how ESCI will be handled stands to affect faculty in significant ways and we do not agree that the proposal should be executed as currently planned. Our group is aware of research that suggests that the evaluation scores will initially drop when an online version is implemented, and that there will be reductions in the scores. This research should be reviewed and made available to faculty and lecturers during the pilot stage of the project. Research in this area also shows that when the person being evaluated is present during the online survey process, the outcome is different than if they were not present. Research that is available on these aspects of an online process should be referred to when considering the results of the pilot project.” These differences between paper and online systems suggest that attempts to maintain comparability in scores may well prove futile. At issue is therefore not the mode of delivery, but the discontinuation of ESCI as we know it, and the design of a new and intrinsically non-comparable evaluation system.

There are several specific areas of concern on the part of the Senate reviewing groups that warrant further discussion and exploration.
The suggested time period of starting at week six for administering the surveys seems much too early to every group. CAP says, “Many courses build up to a synthetic or climactic conclusion, so it would be premature to administer evaluations in weeks as early as 6 - 8. Also, some students may opt to evaluate early in response to low grades or challenging assignments, registering their protest before they have actually done the assignments or the hard work needed to improve a low grade.” CPB wonders if students will be able to change their evaluations in week eight or nine. UgC points out that a four week window in which to evaluate a course creates inherent bias for a particular course; an evaluation done in week six would not be comparable to an evaluation done in week ten.

Several groups point out that the incentives for completing an evaluation seem weak. CFIA states that they are “unconvinced that the incentives listed (early access to their grades) will encourage students to go online and complete the evaluations. Do we even have evidence that faculty are able to submit grades significantly prior to the deadline to make the offer of this incentive meaningful?” CRIR suggests that faculty do not need additional pressure around grading and issues of security would arise if completing a survey is connected to grades. Other groups echo this concern believing that there will be a significant drop in participation unless more realistic incentives are built in. UgC and the COE FEC suggest that perhaps students would either have to complete the evaluation or “actively” opt out of doing it before having access to their grades.

Of great concern is the expectation that participation will drop significantly. Most groups commented that the student responses will likely represent the extremes, both positive and negative, thereby losing the middle and providing skewed and/or inconclusive results. CAP says, that “It would also lead to a more bifurcated distribution of scores for each class, which would be hard to interpret if data from the middling majority of students are missing because they were not inspired (or angered) enough to log on and report.” CAP and others have serious doubts that students will choose to complete a survey on their own time. CAP states, “Already, CAP sees response rate problems in many dossiers in the personnel system. CAP takes strong issue with the report’s statement that ‘90% of our students complete evaluations on average.’” CAP continues to say that “High completion rates are generally obtained in small enrollment courses, but it is very rare to get anything close to that high response rate in large lecture classes. Perhaps the statement meant to say that 90% of all courses get a high completion rate.” CRIR suggests that perhaps the last class continues to be the right time and asking students to fill out the survey on their laptops (or smartphones) might work. There are challenges with wireless classrooms but that is a preferred strategy, if possible.

CAP finds the narrative comments of very high value to their work in evaluating personnel cases, especially in interpreting the middle range scores. They believe that in the classroom, there is ample time to complete evaluations and students provide comments in part because time is allowed and because they see other students doing the same. They are concerned that an online survey will inadvertently encourage students to simply check boxes and not write any substantive commentary. At the same time CFIA wonders about an alternative yet worrisome problem; students who do not attend class completing a survey.

Some groups suggest that this may be the time to re-evaluate the survey instrument altogether, and they welcome the plan to evaluate the question bank as discussed in the Report. The current survey does not ask about the level of student engagement in the course (did they attend class, did they do the reading/homework prior to lectures, etc.). Many groups believe that trying to capture student engagement could be most helpful. CAP states, “By asking questions more geared to student self-assessments of their efforts and discouraging responses geared toward the entertainment value of the course
or the personalities of instructors, we might produce different expectations from students for their own contributions to the learning environment of UCSB."

Several groups were curious as to whether the Task Force had studied other institutions who had implemented online evaluation systems. The COE FEC is aware of “data from other institutions in which a change from paper to online surveys resulted in drastically reduced participation rates. The FEC was particularly concerned that the proposal offers no evidence of benchmarking of similar initiatives outside of UCSB. CRIR members are aware that there is substantive research on these questions and they urge the Task Force to provide background research to faculty. Although the Report mentions literature on the subject, several believe that surveying institutions who have implemented online surveys could be very useful.

A few groups said that further cost savings and costs should be explored before moving forward. CRIR questions whether the current IT systems have the necessary capacity. They say, “It is imperative to allow for simultaneous and synchronous data collection and we are not convinced that this can this be handled well.” Questions arose about costs of enhanced security systems if necessary. Finally, some members of CRIR think that limited resources could be better utilized by enhancing the online course and registration system rather than ESCI.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.