

Michael J.F. Barresi, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Biology Department

Julio A.S.S. Alves, Ph.D.
Director
Jacobson Center

Proposal for a Midsemester Assessment Program

Dear President Christ and the Strategic Planning Committee:

Smith College administration and faculty offer students a strong commitment to teaching. Faculty in all disciplines unquestionably implement impressive pedagogical practices in their daily teaching. However, three important factors affect the quality of teaching.

1. Most Assistant Professors enter into faculty positions with little to no teaching experience, which means that they spend upwards of their first three year learning to teach effectively. During these three years, new faculty are generally very eager to learn about teaching, and very receptive to new ideas. Alternatively, experienced faculty who have been teaching a particular course "well" for years get comfortable and are less apt to feel the need or desire to critically examine their pedagogical choices.
2. The student body should impact how we teach in order to meet student needs. The student body changes constantly (in preparation, learning styles, etc.), and faculty sometimes do not realize that what they have successfully done before with one student body does not work with the current one.
3. Faculty do not currently have a professional with whom to discuss advances in pedagogical philosophies.

In order to help address these issues, we are proposing the adoption of a Mid-Semester Assessment Program (MSA), a program based on that currently being employed by the Center for Teaching at UMass, Amherst. The Program emphasizes improvement while it can still impact those currently invested in the course.

A MSA evaluation takes about 20-25 minutes of class time. First, the evaluator meets with the professor to discuss her concerns. Once in the classroom, the evaluator informs the students that the professor requested the assessment so she can be informed about how the class is going and gather suggestions for improvement. The process is voluntary and confidential. Students are then divided into small groups (3-4) and asked two general questions and one faculty-generated question. They brainstorm, discuss the different ideas among themselves, and decide what is most important to communicate to the professor. The evaluator organizes the responses and meets with the professor.

This program has three unique benefits, we think:

1. The course assessment is conducted mid-semester, when both the students and the professor are still directly invested in the course. Too often, end of semester evaluations have no impact on teaching because some students do not participate, others do not put much effort into them for non-pedagogical reasons, and the professor is too tired to really reflect on them. Mid-semester assessment promotes reflection when the professor is interested in doing so, and enables him or her to make changes to meet the students' unforeseen needs. It also validates student input and makes students active participants in their own learning.
2. An equally important part of the program is that it is carried out by a third professional employed by the college but outside of the professor's department, someone who is not invested in the professor's course or tenure process. The evaluator's sole goal is to provide the professor with good data to implement constructive course changes when they are still possible.
3. The process occurs off faculty record, except for a note about the professor's participation in the program.

We think the MSA program will make faculty more open to the idea of critically examining and improving their teaching, as well as provide an ever changing student body with an effective voice.