2012 Classrooms Survey
Executive Summary of Findings

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Background

During the Spring 2012 semester the Classroom Policy and Steering Committee (CPSC) solicited the input of faculty members on a variety of issues related to the University's general purpose classrooms. The goals of the faculty outreach effort were to 1) collect faculty suggestions for improving classrooms, 2) identify inconsistencies in access to adequate classroom facilities, 3) increase faculty awareness about classroom constraints and opportunities, and 4) identify potential areas for innovation.

Two online surveys were developed, one for instructors and one for individuals with primary responsibility for scheduling classrooms on behalf of individual academic units.

A total of 489 (51.3%) out of 953 faculty members invited to participate completed the classroom survey. Sixty (64.5%) of the 93 campus scheduling officers invited to participate completed the survey.

Faculty comments included in this executive summary are taken from open-ended questions included in the surveys.

The full report is available at the Center for Faculty Excellence website at:
http://cfe.unc.edu/reports/

Key Findings

The diverse needs of UNC faculty members require a range of classroom designs and furniture.

It will come as no surprise that classroom preferences vary significantly among our faculty members. Some of the same classrooms listed as most-liked by some faculty members were listed as least-liked by other faculty members. The results of this survey underscore the value of having a diverse inventory of campus classrooms. Instructor preferences for classrooms are informed by a number of variables that include preferred teaching methods, supporting infrastructure, proximity to office space, and environmental factors such as temperature and natural light.

> *"There can be no ideal or perfect design. Different courses, different students, and different pedagogies require different designs. The struggle is to balance consistency, affordability, and adaptability. Any approach will require compromises from the designers, teachers, and students. That's just the nature of classroom design."*

> (Professor, English and Comparative Lit)

Greater faculty input should be solicited on classroom design and renovation.

Faculty members identified a number of classroom design shortfalls, including poor lighting and the placement of writing boards behind projection screens. Discrepancies between classroom design and instructional methods were not limited to older classrooms; the classroom singled out by the most instructors as being difficult to teach in is in one the University's newest buildings, Chapman Hall.

"Faculty who use specific classrooms need to have closer interaction with those who are designing these spaces, their seating plans, and the educational technologies available."

(Professor, Physics and Astronomy)

Most faculty members are open to alternative classroom furniture, designs, and technologies that support their preferred method of teaching.

- 64% of faculty members said that tablet arm chairs with casters (piloted Spring 2012) would be a good fit with their preferred method of teaching.
- Nearly 50% of faculty members expressed an interest in learning more about classroom technologies such as class response systems and the ability to control podium computers with a smart phone or tablet (e.g. iPad)

"If I were in rooms in which furniture could be moved, I would be more inclined to try group discussions and other activities that I presently do not do a lot with."

(Professor, Biology)

Faculty members are increasingly concerned about the impact that overcrowding in the classrooms has on their ability to interact directly with students.

- 62% of faculty members identified the ability to move around the classroom and interact with students as a *very important* consideration when selecting a classroom.
- Nearly 1 in 5 instructors mentioned over-crowding in comments about classrooms they disliked.

"Putting additional chairs in every room is adding to classroom capacity, but really diminishing the teaching/learning experience in many of the smaller rooms as you are literally confined to one "space" in the room once students with book bags have filled the room. It does not contribute to dynamic lecturing, nor to physically approaching students to better hear questions, listen to their comments, etc."

(Associate Professor, American Studies)

The instructional methods of most of our faculty members now depend on classroom media and projection technologies.

Among all classroom variables, technology (e.g., computers, projection, document cameras, media players) was rated as most important by both faculty members and scheduling officers.

- 90% of faculty members identified classroom technology as *very important* to their decisions about classroom selection.

- 86% of scheduling officers identified classroom technology as *very important* to instructors in their departments.

"Not everyone uses technology on a regular basis in the classroom, but the option should always be available for instructors. I find that the number one complaint from faculty/instructors is that the room that they have is inadequate in this regard. Even though we request rooms with technology at a high priority, we usually end up with a few that lack this fundamental option..."

(Scheduling Officer, College of Arts and Sciences)

Faculty access to technology classrooms is inconsistent.

Despite the University's ongoing investments in technology classrooms, access to these classrooms is not consistent across academic units. Some faculty members and scheduling officers mentioned fairness issues in how technology classrooms are scheduled. Among the greatest concerns is the ability to support faculty members who have updated their teaching methods with appropriate classrooms.

- One in four scheduling officers reported not being able to schedule enough technology classrooms.
- Some instructors reported having to cart their own projection technology to a classroom that did not have it.

"I am pleased that we have so many smart classrooms at UNC. At the same time, I have become used to these smart classrooms and have designed my classes around them and now have integrated activities such as videos, YouTube, and showing documents via the document camera, and am very disappointed when I find myself in a classroom that does not allow me to do this. These activities help engage the students and allow us to do so much more in our courses, and are an important part of the learning process."

(Lecturer, Romance Languages)

The University's current system for matching the instructional methods and preferences of instructors with appropriate classrooms is neither effective nor efficient for many faculty members.

The effective utilization of a diverse classroom inventory requires a scheduling system that can that can efficiently place instructors in classrooms that address as many of their instructional preferences as possible. The challenges to meeting this goal are many, and include departmental scheduling priorities that often discourage efficient utilization of general purpose classrooms.

- *Fewer than half* of the scheduling officers that responded to the survey have a formal system for matching instructor preferences and classrooms; among those that do, there is no standard approach.
- Classroom preference information must be entered into the central scheduling system every term; instructor/course profiles cannot be saved and reused.
- During the 2 weeks at beginning of each semester, dozens (100+) of courses must be rescheduled to meet instructor preferences.

"You know professors don't select classrooms, don't you? The staff does it. We don't have a lot of choice. I have no input in classroom selection so these questions are irrelevant to me. I've actually never been asked about which classrooms I prefer."

(Professor, College of Arts and Sciences)

" ...Tuesday/Thursday classes have been a struggle in the past and everyone wants to teach 10-2. We schedule our classes taught by graduate students at 11am and 2pm in order to be able to schedule graduate classes around those times…."

(Scheduling Officer, College of Arts and Sciences)

Improving faculty access to appropriate classrooms will likely require a balanced approach that emphasizes a combination of physical classroom upgrades and scheduling policy revisions.

A recurring question during analysis of the survey results concerns the extent to which scheduling policies promote the inconsistencies reported by faculty members. For example, with respect to access to technology classrooms, does the University need additional technology classrooms or do the existing classrooms just need to be scheduled more effectively? The answer is likely a combination of both, and each presents a variety of challenges.

"The state of the classroom makes all the difference in terms of teaching the course. We are supposed to be a leading university in this country; it is embarrassing that some of our classrooms have not been updated since the 1960s."

(Instructor, Political Science)

"Often faculty who do not need any technology are given the rooms in our building because of time preferences. But we cannot teach in any classroom w/o it."

(Associate Professor, English and Comp Lit)

Further Discussion

The results of this survey were presented to the Classroom Policy and Steering Committee in early fall 2012 and will inform its deliberations about the University's classroom renovation priorities and scheduling policies.

Questions?

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