

EXCERPT FROM DRAFT TRANSCRIPT
OF THE MARCH 30, 2012 SENATE PLENARY:
DISCUSSION OF PROPOSAL TO PROVIDE OPEN COURSE EVALUATIONS

LEE BOLLINGER: Now we have two things on committee reports, and the first one is on encouraging university schools to implement open course evaluations.

RYAN TURNER: Great. Okay. Thank you all, fellow senators, for hearing us today. I think everybody pretty much knows what this resolution and report are about. The roots of this initiative go back several years in the Student Affairs Committee, but we've really ramped up the process in the past year. Now we've basically followed a process in three or four different tracks at once, and we've reviewed all the existing systems at Columbia schools, also at peer schools. We've taken a look at the academic literature on the subject of course evaluations. We've looked at third-party technologies that are becoming very popular: Rate My Professors, myEdu.com, and of course CULPA, which is the Columbia-specific implementation. We've also had a number of meetings with plenty of stakeholders across the university: professors, students, administrators, and of course a great many of the committees of this Senate. So we have actually had an ongoing conversation for quite a while now, but I think this is a great chance to open that conversation up to the entire Senate. And as was mentioned, we also would like to extend the conversation even further beyond the Senate to the entire university community.

So in our conversations with the various stakeholders, we have identified a few areas of concern. Our report addresses these concerns in great detail so I don't want to belabor them here today. I encourage you all to get a full copy of this report. You have in front of you the table of

contents and the executive summary of that report, but the full report goes into a lot of detail about all of these points you see here. And I would just reiterate that really none of the concerns that we've heard are unique to Columbia and none of them are terribly new. They've been faced by plenty of schools in the past, Columbia professional schools and peer institutions, and all of them have been resolved quite successfully.

SARA SNEDEKER (STU., BARNARD): So the goal of the subcommittee has been to take into account all this information that we've been gathering and build a recommendation that is uniquely suited for Columbia University and this community. So some of the recommendations that are outlined in the report in detail are to release the responses to selected quantitative questions. Not every quantitative question that is asked right now is appropriate for students to see the results of. It's important to make a distinction between questions for the use of students and questions for the use of faculty and departments. Also we are hoping for the release of at least one qualitative question. At Yale there's a very similar question asked to this -- would you recommend this course to your peers and why? -- and I think that this question is general enough that students can give their feedback however they see fit, but also specific enough that it tells students that what the purpose of this question is.

Also, we've had extensive discussions with graduate student senators and also the Graduate Student Advisory Council, and as a result, we are recommending an opt-in system for graduate students. This recognizes that graduate students are students first, and that their teaching is part of their learning process. But we also believe that there are some graduate students, many graduate students who will choose to opt in to the system

The other thing that we are recommending is a grace period for all new professors. So the first two semesters of teaching for any professor would be subject to this grace period and the results from the evaluation of those semesters would never be released. And this is to make sure that faculty have the opportunity to adjust to the Columbia community and to see feedback and incorporate this feedback before the results of the evaluations are released.

We're also proposing to extend the evaluation period beyond finals. Right now it takes place during reading week, and we believe that extending it past finals will allow students to: one, give their feedback including their interpretations and feelings based on the final exam; and two, allow them to give more detailed and more substantive feedback because they will not be doing so during the most busy week of the semester, during reading period.

TURNER: And if I could add, many of our peer institutions have come to that same realization in recent years.

SNEDEKER: Right. Also we are hoping that eventually this system will be integrated with the directory of classes. Ideally students will be able to see the results of their evaluations easily when they're shopping for classes. And we're hoping that it will be possible to see the results aggregated for a professor over time or a class over time and be able to search for a specific professor or a specific class very easily. The CourseWorks system right now does not accommodate this. And also just to reiterate, it's really important to use this as an opportunity to evaluate the evaluation process itself, and select questions that will be released very carefully and word the questions with all these considerations in mind.

The other thing that we're proposing is a roll-out period during which only tenured professors will be included in the new open system. This is something we discussed with the Faculty Affairs Committee and that we believe will help transition the community in an appropriate way. So as a first step, there's a current capability in CourseWorks that will allow the release of quantitative results. Then as quickly as possible a better system should be put in place, but during this transition phase only tenured faculty would be included in the system.

ALEX FROUMAN (STU., CC): So I'd like to provide a summary of what we're talking about and why we're here and what the real resolution is that you have in front of you and what we're hoping to see from the Senate and what we're looking for today.

And the first caveat I want to add is that we talk about a lot of our peer schools in this report and in this presentation, and that is in no way to imply that because our peer schools do something that we should do it. That is not our belief, and I don't think it's the belief of most people at Columbia. We're a proud bunch. However, I do think our peer schools provide us lessons, and so as we continue course evaluations, if the concerns are specific to implementation or the consequence of opening course evaluations, we can look at our peer schools and see that these enormous negative impacts occurred on these campuses, and if they have not, as it appears that they haven't, why aren't we doing it here? So it's not just because they're doing it that we're doing it. We believe open course evaluations are important because of the reasons we give in the report about openness and transparency and helping students make the best decisions about their education. And then when it comes to the implementation, that is where our peer schools are an effective model. So I hope to at least frame the conversation in that light.

And in terms of the resolution in front of you, what we're proposing, what we see the role of the Senate to be, is starting the conversation with the various faculties. We don't want to decide for them. If you look at the title of the resolution, it's *encouraging* Columbia University schools. And if you look at the very specific language under the resolved clause, we hope that schools consider open course evaluations, consider the intricacies of their schools and what the implementation might look like, and do it within the next academic year because we think this is a pressing issue that should be discussed at the highest levels of the faculty, and we hope to see a decision working with faculty and students as soon as possible.

TURNER: I want to add two quick points. First, that this is a student-led initiative. That's no secret. But this is really an initiative that we feel strongly benefits the entire university community. This is not an issue of students versus faculty at all. We feel this is a great benefit to everyone, not least because the release of the evaluations to students sends a clear message that students' opinions are valued in a way that is not currently done, that will encourage them to think carefully and provide better feedback to faculty. We've seen that pattern at other schools as well.

And finally, this initiative is just bringing back an institution that existed at Columbia for a great many years, with the Columbia-Barnard course guide, that provided most of the features that we're talking about. So Columbia actually has a very long tradition of doing exactly what we're talking about. That institution sadly dried up for lack of funding in the '90s, but this is not something revolutionary. It's not something antithetical to the Columbia culture at all. This is something that's really been a part of the fabric of Columbia culture before, and we think should be again.

FROUMAN: With that, I'm going to open the floor to discussion.

SHARYN O'HALLORAN (TEN., SIPA): Okay. So we'll have some questions. Yes.

GRACIELA CHICHILNISKY (TEN., A&S/SOCIAL SCIENCES): I have two questions.

The first question is, Does the transparency that you are proposing extend to revealing the identity of the students the way you are revealing the identity of the professors? That's one question. So that we have full transparency in the case that is needed. And second, I need to understand, but it's my fault, the difference if you can say it very succinctly, with apologies for not knowing this, between what you are proposing, which I sort of understand from this, no problem, and what exists now. I apologize for this, but I have the impression that the students who choose my courses do so and they tell me they do so because they have seen course evaluations. So I'm just wondering, What am I missing here?

FROUMAN: Which school are you from?

CHICHILNISKY: Arts and Sciences, Economics and Statistics departments.

FROUMAN: To your first point. That's something that's been discussed. I can say it probably for the same reasons course evaluations are anonymous right now, you don't put your name on a course evaluation because you don't want the faculty to be able to identify you and there are potential adverse effects of giving negative feedback to faculty who are in the department, might have some power over your education, your performance, your scholarships, your awards, etc.

So I do think that's a good idea and I would like to see it, but I'm not sure how we could mitigate those effects.

CHICHILNISKY: Well, there's one. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but one way to do that is that you can make the information compulsory, but you can screen its availability unless it is really needed. So that you know, I understand your concern, and I do understand that the professors and the students are in an asymmetrical power situation. But at the same time, you know, you must know the people who write anonymous comments in the internet have a bias, and I don't know why, to write junk and to write very aggressive. I don't understand this. Okay? I have no idea. So in some sense you may be inviting a lot of aggressive junk that seems to be characteristic of the comments that are offered in the internet when they're offered anonymously. I happen to be in favor of the evaluations. I'm just wondering about that point.

FROUMAN: I also want to answer your second question for your information. I believe your students are probably referring to CULPA.info, which is a third-party website run by students, where students are allowed to publish evaluations. And in fact one of the reasons we're hoping to release the official evaluations is that CULPA is a very inadequate resource. It tends to contain polarized reviews of people that loved the class or hated the class, and tends not to be very representative of the students. It also happens to be anonymous and largely unmoderated and would be inappropriate. And I think that in a system that we envision, we would have a system for faculty to flag or remove inappropriate comments that shouldn't be published. But also something that Ryan was mentioning earlier about other schools is that we do believe, and we realize that students sometimes write non-helpful and perhaps offensive things in course

evaluations, and that is problematic. And one thing we do hope is that by releasing the evaluations students become more thoughtful and realize that they are being used and read. Because I'm not sure all students do know that, and they don't know where the evaluation goes at the end of the semester.

CHICHILNISKY: But somebody should know who they are, although they may not be made available widely. But there should be some way of identifying.

SNEDEKER: I definitely agree that there should be some sort of accountability, and I think that's where a system that allows a professor to maybe petition an administrative department to remove an evaluation. Right now evaluations are anonymous and it's like Alex said to protect students and have them be able to write their true feelings. And I think that if perhaps if there's an inappropriate comment, the administrator would be able to go in and remove the comment, and I don't know if they are able currently to see who posted the comments, but I know that professors are not.

CHICHILNISKY: Well, you need a rule about that. Right? I mean it cannot be just--

SNEDEKER: There's a line in the resolution that has it.

TURNER: And let me add that the pattern that we've seen with CULPA is that because only a few students log in, they're highly motivated to do a hatchet job or to laud their professor. Only a few students do that. Those reviews seem to be very polarized, and they have very lasting

effects. Whereas an official Columbia system, more or less compulsory, with a much larger response rate, you get a much more balanced and nuanced picture, and it's not so polarized.

O'HALLORAN: Okay. I'm going to move on from the questions, but I think that's a very good point. Yes, in the back, please.

WAFAA EL-SADR (TEN., SPH): Yes. I'm wondering, Did your group include any students from the uptown campus when you looked at this? Bbecause most of the teaching, I don't know the exact proportion, is by non-tenured professors. Did you take that into account?

SNEDEKER: Yes.

EL-SADR: I mean in some schools—

SNEDEKER: Our subcommittee consisted mostly of students from the downtown campus. However, the Student Affairs Committee has been discussing this for the entire academic year. We just actually took a vote today. The Student Affairs Committee unanimously supports this resolution, and that includes several senators from the uptown campus. I would also like to point out that I think that the uptown campus, and for example, the Dental School, is a great example of a school that needs to have specific considerations before any system is implemented. So at the Dental School all classes are compulsory. There's no course choice. And so that a system that applies to the Dental School and a system that applies to Columbia College, for example, should not look the same.

MARILYN IVY (TEN., A&S/SOCIAL SCIENCES): Yes, I'm Marilyn Ivy from Arts and Sciences. It seems to me that there's some kind of confusion of shopping for classes and wanting more information for this, with these confidential evaluations, which at least up to now have been used for promotion and tenure and for giving feedback, confidential feedback, to teachers about their performance. And when they're used very carefully in these promotion cases, there's a context, you know, there's discussion. The way you are seemingly imaging these being used is, first of all on the internet, which is, as we all know, highly problematic, but anonymous, they're unverifiable, they're not correlated with performance by the evaluators.

SNEDEKER: They're anonymous in the sense that the readers cannot see.

IVY: Well, I'm not finished. Let me finish. It's not correlated, controlled for any factors, and there are actually quite a number of studies that show that faculty of color, for example, receive lower course evaluations than their white peers. That there's gender bias. How would this control for all those factors? Bias, you know, gender bias. There's race bias. There's any number of studies that show that. And when it's just you're being evaluated is anonymously being out there. There's no accountability. And it's not transparent if it doesn't work both ways.

TURNER: I think that those are fantastic concerns, you know, racial and gender bias.

IVY: Among other things.

TURNER: They're complicated concerns that we absolutely need to address. That's why this proposal in no way intends to lock anyone into a hard-coded system. Those are the kinds of concerns that every school needs to consider individually. I would add that no accountability sounds more like the existing standard which is CULPA, and those reviews are truly public to anyone on the internet. This system would be behind the Columbia authentication.

IVY: You know that this can be dispersed.

O'HALLORAN: So let me -- Bette.

BETTE GORDON (NT, ARTS): I'm in support of what Marilyn said, and I just want to reiterate that I feel like there's two different needs going on here. On the one hand, I respect the idea that students need to know and find out how to choose professors and classes, and I think that's really important. But I'm not sure by publishing evaluations that we get that. Evaluations are taken really seriously department to department, school to school. We use them. We discuss whether or not they make sense. It's not a light thing when we evaluate each other. We really take some time to figure out whether those evaluations have merit or not. The purpose of evaluations for faculty are very different than what you're asking for. Perhaps this idea of shopping, which I understand, and your need to know what to take and whom to take it with is good, but let's not use evaluations to do that. I heard a colleague in Engineering talk about faculty maybe videotaping their approach to how they teach. Maybe there could be some interviews with students to talk about what the value of that course was. But to use evaluations seems a negative rather than a positive.

O'HALLORAN: Okay. I want to collect a few because they're all in the genre. Yes. Please identify yourself.

MICHELLE BALLAN (NT, SOCIAL WORK): Michelle Ballan from the School of Social Work. I just wanted to say: On page 17 you talk about the School of Social Work's evaluations and that they can be seen by students in the central office. Which is true, but the only point that you need to clarify is, that's only our quantitative evaluations. And our dean, no one else but the instructors can actually see the qualitative. Not even during promotion and reappointment.

O'HALLORAN: Okay, and then the far back. Yes.

BALLAN:: And one more thing. In terms of the report, which I think is very well done, I was a little surprised in regard to your comment that there wasn't more literature because he did a very good job of covering the literature.

O'HALLORAN: Okay. Thank you.

JEANINE D'ARMIENTO: I want to strongly support what Dr. Ivy stated. I'm from the Medical Center, Jeanine D'Armiento. I think that publishing negative comments that potentially are biased would allow those comments to be perpetuated over time, and then when people come up for tenure that would be a very big problem. So I see this as a huge problem.

FROUMAN: If I may now, we've received a number of comments. I think it would be nice to have a dialogue as much as possible. I think those are important considerations. I think this is a great place to learn from our peer schools. You know, we haven't heard any feedback from faculty at other schools. I'm sure many of you have colleagues at these other schools, and I'd be interested in hearing if this bias was happening on a large scale. I think this raises the point that we do need oversight of these evaluations before they're published, like we're proposing. And I think on the comment that evaluations are critiqued themselves and faculty ask when they're making decisions are they valid and do they have merit, I believe students ask the same questions. And I don't think we're so naïve as to see a single evaluation and take it as the truth. And I do think we will take these evaluations, I know these evaluations are part of talking to peers, talking to faculty advisers, and talking to other and current faculty in making course selections. And there are a lot of courses at Columbia, as I'm sure you know, and it really comes down to a matter of our education and choosing the best education for us. And I do think we're nuanced enough to know the difference. And to look back at the first point, I look forward to hearing from faculty at the peer schools if these large issues of bias have become a problem. And on the matter of the internet, so for example, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton do all publish course evaluations on the internet. I similarly have not heard of any controversy of evaluations being published to the world, things being released. They're all securely held behind passwords, and if anyone were able to find a similar event happening, I think that would be an interesting thing for us to look at, but I'm not sure it has.

O'HALLORAN: Okay. Ron.

RON MAZOR (STU., LAW): So speaking from experience, the Law School has an online course evaluation system, anonymous, available to all students. It's been in place for years, and it's very effective. We have both quantitative and qualitative feedback. We have pie charts about the amount of time spent reading for the class, the kind of workload assigned, is the class Socratic? Is it lecture-based? Is it more free-form? And then we have qualitative responses. You know, would you recommend the class to your peers? What did the professor do well in his class? What did he do poorly? And a lot of these issues that are coming up are not a problem when it comes to our online evaluations. They're taken seriously, and they're done very, very well, and students use them all the time because it is important for us to be able to see the quality of professor and the quality of class that they're offering. So this already exists at Columbia in the Law School and it works very well.

O'HALLORAN: Okay.

EMILY ROSS (STU., SIPA): Emily Ross, senator from SIPA. I would like to second what Ron said. SIPA is one of the leaders in this issue. As Professor O'Halloran knows, all of our course evaluations from two, maybe even three years past, we do midterm and final course evaluations. Never once has something been leaked in any way. I think, if your issue is it being leaked, then I would worry about anything being leaked, your credit card, anything else that Columbia holds of mine, my Social Security number. I don't know why somebody would care about this over any of the other things of mine Columbia has. But there's a variety of courses offered, it gives basic quantitative information that is always useful and more information not less I think is what we should all be looking for.

O'HALLORAN: Did you?

CHICHILNISKY: In that case, why are we suppressing the information about the students' names? If you want more information, that would be the way I would go.

O'HALLORAN: Okay. We're going to hold that. Thank you for that recommendation.

ADIL AHAMED (STU., BUS.): Adil Ahamed, co-chair of the Student Affairs Committee. I also wanted to build on what my colleagues Emily and Ron were both saying in the sense that in the Business School we also have a course evaluation system which is very widely used. And to this date I've not come across any kind of negative comments about teachers or anything that would make us feel that this system was being abused in any way. I know that my colleagues in the Business School use it heavily and rely on it. And it has helped a lot of them craft their plans for taking courses in the Business School. The other thing that I wanted to point out is that there's no way to cut out any or all, I should say all, negative responses that would come in. It's impossible in any circumstance or in any field, but the group of people who have put this report together have taken into consideration a wide range of different issues that could potentially come up. And I think that it's a matter of additional reflection before we can come out with a resolution that is meaningful for everybody and that works in a way that advances everybody's objectives of improving the educational environment at Columbia.

O'HALLORAN: We're going to take just a few more questions.

ANDREW PAYNE (STU., ARTS). Is it my understanding that starting in 1963 to 1994, for about thirty years, that grade distributions, course evaluations were all published, and that the only reason that Columbia stopped was of financial strains on actually publishing this book?

FROUMAN: That is the only reason that we were aware of

TURNER: Let me add that grade distributions were not available that entire time. They were instituted at a later date. Yes.

PAYNE: So somebody might have some evaluations in there. [Laughter]

D'ARMIENTO: So I just want to add, I appreciate that the students have had the online evaluations for years, but I think that since this technology is quite recent I don't know if we know the impact on the review of promotion. And I think for the faculty that is the single major concern that it could affect promotions in a biased fashion.

O'HALLORAN: Rebecca.

REBECCA JORDAN-YOUNG (FAC., BARNARD): Just for clarification, is it correct that at this point SIPA, Business and Law all have open evaluations?

FROUMAN: That's correct.

JORDAN-YOUNG: Are those the only schools?

SNEDEKER: No, Journalism has quantitative results. There's a few. Barnard has an opt-in system for some departments. Columbia College, the economics department, has recently—

FROUMAN: The Arts and Sciences has now opt-in from the graduates.

TURNER: That doesn't include qualitative reviews. Those you mentioned have by far the most robust—

O'HALLORAN: Okay. So we're only going to close this off. Sam, did you have one last quick question?

SAMUEL SILVERSTEIN (TEN., P&S): This is a very good report and I support the evaluation. But it wasn't my understanding from the beginning that unedited, unexpurgated written evaluations of all kinds would be put up on the net. Is that what you intend?

FROUMAN: Not at all.

SNEDEKER: No.

SAM: So tell us what you envision.

GORDON: Who's going to edit them?

FROUMAN: So there is a system that currently exists at Harvard that we found that at least appears to be very effective, and that is that the faculty member has the ability to flag any review as inappropriate –

SNEDEKER: Before they're released.

FROUMAN: Before they're released. So faculty members see them first. So you would receive your reviews, you would then read your evaluations. The ones you deemed inappropriate, you would flag. At Harvard it's the registrar's office. They would then review it and determine whether or not it was inappropriate or just negative, and they would remove evaluations that were inappropriate but not any evaluations that were negative. And that at least has been a successful program at Harvard, and that appears to us to be a successful model for moderating these results.

O'HALLORAN: Okay.

PHILIP GENTY (NT, LAW): Philip Genty, nontenured from the Law School. I just very briefly want to associate myself with Ron [Mazor]'s comments. From a faculty standpoint, I think our open evaluation system has worked very well. I think in this proposal you are taking a moderate approach by putting the emphasis on the quantitative, where the qualitative I think is the one that is more of a concern to people. I also think the idea of starting initially with the most

protected faculty members makes a lot of sense. The only thing that I would add is that a challenge for us has been response rates, and I think that's a challenge for any school, that you need to encourage that, so you get as representative a sampling as possible. Otherwise, even under this system, you get the skewing at the two extremes.

O'HALLORAN: Okay. So I want to thank everyone for a very robust discussion. And we're going to continue this discussion in a town hall forum of some type, and we'll be making an announcement of date, time and venue. And I just want to thank everyone. And please continue and please contact the students. I know, I know, I know. I would like closure and then we'll move to you. And then on this. We have one more report that is itching to go, and this is the franking privileges of the university senate members....