

A STATEMENT FROM THE FACULTY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS

ON ANONYMOUS COMMENTS IN COURSE EVALUATIONS AND TITLE IX INVESTIGATIONS

In his letter to Faculty Affairs on December 4, 2014 Provost Coatsworth reminded us that *“the University is obligated by Title IX to take seriously and investigate all complaints of discrimination or sexual harassment regardless of whether they are made anonymously or by formal complaint, and regardless of whether they are made by an aggrieved individual or are brought to the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action by someone else.”* The provost made this statement in response to concerns that were raised by FAC about a Title IX investigation and the temporary suspension of a faculty member a year ago that started with an anonymous accusation on CourseWorks. He also affirmed that the University Senate is the appropriate setting for a discussion of the issue of anonymous complaints in CourseWorks evaluations.

The original motivation behind the creation of student course evaluations was to provide faculty with feedback to help them improve their teaching. Obviously both positive and negative feedback are helpful, and we understand the reason for keeping these comments anonymous—the concern that a faculty member might retaliate.

Today the purpose of course evaluations has changed. They are no longer simply a tool for constructive feedback. The administration routinely uses them as a metric for evaluating faculty performance and making decisions about promotion and tenure, and students have argued for open course evaluations, including anonymous qualitative comments, as a way to provide other students with their opinions of a particular course or faculty member. When the Senate debated open course evaluations in the spring of 2012, the issue of the role of such anonymous comments in Title IX-based screening and investigation had not yet surfaced.

Anonymous complaints in CourseWorks may tell an unfortunate truth about an instructor, or they may be malicious attempts to damage a professor’s reputation. Too often students use anonymous comments to express untethered vitriol. A good reputation is an important asset in our lives and careers, and damage to a reputation is not easily undone, even if a subsequent investigation uncovers no evidence of culpability.

We have noted a growing concern among our colleagues that Title IX prohibitions are being indiscriminately enforced, with troubling implications for the academic freedom of the professoriate. While we appreciate the provost’s assurance that no decision to suspend a faculty member will be made without his explicit approval, it remains unclear at what point in a Title IX investigation such a serious step is to be considered. Consequently, the university’s

response to such complaints to date has produced a sense of anxiety for many professors and threatens the very spontaneity that is essential to a great teaching environment.

We condemn racist and sexist behaviors, we recognize the University's obligation to take complaints seriously and perform a full investigation, and we understand the need to make clear to students that there are mechanisms in place to allow them to identify such inappropriate behaviors, both anonymously and formally. However, course evaluations should not be the occasion for such complaints. In the case of an anonymous complaint, made in a course evaluation after completion of that course, the threshold for institutional investigation should be higher than it is now. We also call on the university to adopt a working principle that—except in cases where truly egregious or criminal behavior is alleged—that no faculty member's teaching privileges will be suspended unless an investigation has found compelling evidence of wrongdoing.

In view of the concerns that have been expressed by many members of the faculty, we propose to reopen the debate on open course evaluations, with a view to barring qualitative anonymous comments altogether and relying exclusively on quantitative measures of effective teaching.

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