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From the Dean's Office

Joseph Curtis

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From The Dean's Office

It is hereby moved that a committee of four students (a chairman plus one student from each class) be appointed to study the adoption of a course/instructor evaluation program, and that the committee report their findings to the SBA, in writing, not later than the first SBA meeting of the second semester.

The Committee shall be instructed to study the undergraduate instructor evaluation program here at William and Mary, and any other program on which they can obtain information. The committee shall in its written report, submit a specific proposal for a system which can be considered for adoption by the SBA. The proposal shall, in detail, outline the recommended procedure for administering the proposed system, recommend distribution of results, and recommend a complete evaluation form.

The committee shall further be directed that the will and intent of the SBA in establishing such an evaluation system is not to brazenly and contumaciously embarrass any instructor, but it is to establish a sensible system through which constructive and reasonable student criticism can be communicated in good faith to the administration and to the instructor. The purpose of the system will be to make a sincere effort to improve, on a continuing basis, the level of instruction in the law school. The committee shall draft their proposals with the will of the Association in mind, and shall ensure that their recommended system clearly reflects this intent.

PROFESSOR JOSEPH CURTIS

There has been some recent activity on the part of students toward the conducting of a teacher-evaluation project and I have been asked to express my opinion in this column of its worth and feasibility.

I fully recognize that the objective of this activity would not be to provide a formal opportunity to let a teacher know how little you think of him and to see how much you can hurt him in retaliation for what you may presently suppose to be your long sufferings at his hands. The use of "presently suppose" is deliberate, as you may some day find in retrospect that you learned as much or more from the once ill-thought-of teacher as you did from those whom you may now highly regard. Granted that your purpose would not be to vilify but to seek improvement in teaching effectiveness in the best interests of the school, that being, of course, the best interests of the students.

I believe that the students are the best judge of teaching effectiveness, providing that the judgment is that of the large majority of the class, joined in by those representing all levels of achievement, and reached with some consistency over the years. Furthermore, I think that the students collectively are not only good judges of the overall competency of a teacher, but are in the best position to determine his weaknesses and strengths. Perhaps students regard their views in this respect as *res ipsa loquitur* and even conclusive. I do not feel too strongly about it, but I do agree that students' judgment of teacher should be accorded great weight. Consequently, I feel that student opinions, carefully considered and properly channeled, can serve to make a teacher aware, or more aware, of certain weaknesses which he might be able to correct or at least strengthen. A teacher may realize that there is much room for improvement in aspects of his teaching, but not how critical is the need for it.

Such opinions and criticisms, however, are of no value to anyone but the teacher himself. If the true objective is to improve teaching effectiveness, they should not be used publicly to rank the teacher, to impeach him, or otherwise as a medium for discredit. So long as they are imparted only to the teacher, he can accept them with more objectivity and not feel that he must reject them, consciously or otherwise, in defense of his standing with others. Assuming that he has integrity, and a student evaluation project would be no proper way to challenge that, he is much concerned that his work is of value to

(Continued on Page 3)

FROM THE DEAN'S OFFICE

(Continued from Page 2)

those who it is intended to benefit, and his conscience would not permit his ego, even an inflated one, to reject well-directed criticism. When you place his economic welfare and professional reputation at stake, you inject a conflict of interests and tend to compel him to regard your criticism as attack and not guidance. I would therefore resist any planned evaluation that contemplated publication of results or distribution of the critiques to any other than the subject teacher.

A teacher should have more than the right merely to refuse participation. He should not, and in fact could not, be compelled to participate. Nor should he be placed in the position of having to say "I will not do so." His declination should not be given the appearance of a refusal to conform, as it should be regarded that it is not yet the norm that students conduct an officially sanctioned critique of their instructors. As a matter of opinion, a teacher may feel that students are not the proper judges of his teaching ability, and as a matter of principle, that they should not be indulged their fling at ill-intentioned swipes. This may be semantics, but I feel that the initiative should be taken by the teacher by way of an invitation to the students to submit critiques if he wishes to receive them, rather than by the students requesting him to do so, and thus seeming to set him apart if he should refuse.

Since a faculty member could not and should not be compelled to submit to student critique, at least officially sanctioned, if he does not wish it, in final analysis this is a matter for individual faculty action and not for the school administration. The views that I have set forth above are expressed as a faculty member and not as dean.

In summary, as a faculty member, I would support a carefully considered student critique form which a faculty member could invite the students in his class to submit to him if he felt that he might profit from their comments on his teaching effectiveness.