I am approving a faculty-administrator committee’s recommendation to move to on-line Student Feedback Forms (e-SFFs) for all undergraduate and graduate courses, effective for Summer, 2012. The remainder of this memorandum provides the background and rationale for this decision.

Currently, Student Feedback Forms (those used by students to assess the teaching of their course instructors) are issued in paper form and are handled through a cumbersome process that includes a number of steps. First, preparation includes printing each of the paper forms with the unique course and section numbers and other designators, distributing them from a central office to schools and colleges across the University to be distributed further to departments and to the instructors of individual course sections. The forms are then filled out by each student in the classroom (without the instructor present), collected and placed into sealed envelopes, which are then collected within the schools and colleges, assembled and sent to the central University office, which then opens the envelopes, assembles the form and has them scanned electronically, including the open-ended comments by students. Each year, this process involves hundreds of thousands of pieces of paper and the work of numerous administrative staff throughout the University.

A joint faculty/administrator committee has been meeting for the past two years looking at the Student Feedback Forms (which were previously called CATEs, or Course and Teaching Evaluations). The committee has submitted “Course and Teaching Evaluations: A White Paper with Recommendations” as a report on its deliberations and findings. As the committee itself stated, this White Paper was “the result of a considerable amount of deliberation, discussion and review of research—including literature on similar faculty evaluation procedures at other institutions and a field visit to the University of Maryland.” The committee also piloted on-line teaching assessments with a number of volunteers over the past few semesters. The committee distributed its White Paper to all faculty and has made presentations to the Faculty Senate, the Faculty Senate Steering Committee and the Council of Deans. The Committee also held a forum open to all faculty and thereafter met with Faculty Senate President Paul LaFollette and me to review their recommendations. Finally, the committee concluded its work and sent me a three-part motion, along with its White Paper.
Let me address the three elements of the committee’s motion.

The first is a recommendation that “the Provost accept recommendation #1 in the White Paper and commit to an e-SFF protocol across all undergraduate and graduate programs of the University for at least the next two years.” I do accept this recommendation. However, I think it is only fair that it be implemented beginning with summer courses of 2012 and not with courses in the current semester. My reasoning is that faculty members should know prior to the beginning of a semester what the rules are with respect to teaching assessments by students. Most faculty members teaching this semester probably expected that student assessment of teaching would be conducted via the standard paper forms. We should honor those expectations. Therefore, effective summer, 2012, the SFFs for all undergraduate and graduate courses will be conducted on-line.

Second, I am in support of the committee’s suggestion that we postpone the implementation of the committee’s White Paper recommendation of providing student access to selected e-SFF results. The committee suggests this postponement until overall response rates improve. Whereas student access may have a favorable impact on e-SFF return rates in the long run, this suggestion is a reasonable one, and it will provide time for us to implement a comprehensive campaign to encourage students to fill out the SFFs on line.

The third element in the committee’s motion is a statement emphasizing that the University should address the assessment of teaching in a more holistic way through University guidelines that include reference to standards-based peer review and self-evaluation as evidence of teaching for tenure and promotion purposes. This is an issue I will ask the University Tenure and Promotion Advisory Committee, made up of tenured faculty members from across the University, to review and make recommendations later this semester.

Let me conclude by thanking the members of the CATE-SFF Committee for their excellent and tireless work in reviewing the many issues associated with student assessments of teaching and for putting together their very thoughtful White Paper. They have demonstrated real leadership in their analyses and recommendations, and we are all deeply indebted to them for their great service.