Students Consulting on Teaching (SCOT):
Moving Toward a Learning-centered Paradigm

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“Your student consultants have videotaped, observed, and interviewed students in two of my
classes. I have found their assistance to be priceless in helping me to learn from my mistakes and
build on my strengths as a teacher. [The SCOT program] is highly conducive to improving the
quality of one’s teaching abilities.”

The foregoing endorsement originated from a faculty member in BYU’s College of Fine Arts and
Communications, a professor who had successfully engaged the services of a student consultant. Like
other members of his department—and virtually every other department throughout campus—this
professor discovered that the Students Consulting on Teaching (SCOT) program could help him become a
better teacher and, more important, his students become more effective learners.

The SCOT program allows trained student consultants to meet with faculty members, observe
their classes, and provide valuable feedback (along with suggestions, if requested) for improved teaching.
Within recent years, BYU’s SCOT program has employed between 10 and 25 SCOTs annually who serve
as many as 33 professors each semester.

At Brigham Young University since 1991, SCOT is part of an international movement known as
the Student Voice. Highly instrumental in launching SCOT at BYU, D. Lynn Sorenson shepherded the
program through the hurdles of its early days, directing the efforts of SCOT students (hereinafter referred
to as “SCOTs”) and interfacing with participating faculty until her retirement in 2013.
What follows is a brief overview of SCOT at Brigham Young University: the roles performed by SCOTs, and precisely how student consultants are doing their part to revolutionize teaching and learning within institutions of higher education.

**SCOT Services Provided to Faculty**

Supplementing student evaluations and peer reviews, SCOTS are prepared to serve as excellent feedback resources to instructors. They generally function in one or more of the following roles:

1. *Recorder/Observer.* The SCOT records, in writing, what went on in the classroom and gives the record to the instructor.
2. *Faux Student.* The SCOT takes notes as if he or she were a student in the class and returns the notes to the instructor.
3. *Video Recorder.* The SCOT films the class and creates a DVD for the instructor. The instructor may invite the SCOT to watch and discuss the video.
4. *Interviewer.* The instructor leaves the classroom for 15-20 minutes while the SCOT conducts an interview with the class. The SCOT asks the students to respond verbally and in writing to questions such as these: What helps your learning? What hinders your learning? What suggestions do you have to make this course a more effective learning experience?
5. *Primed Student.* The SCOT meets with the professor prior to class to receive instructions on what to watch for (e.g., How often are students getting involved in the discussion? Which activities are most engaging?)
6. **Student Consultant.** The instructor asks the SCOT for feedback and suggestions about classroom activities or particular areas of interest.

7. **Other.** The SCOT can assist with classroom research, reflective teaching, action research, etc.¹

   Each assignment is tailored to the professor’s needs and fulfills a specific request. SCOTs are encouraged to be creative, not limiting themselves strictly to the foregoing support roles. Their goal is to determine which service(s) will give the professor the most useful information to help him or her improve student learning, and then to perform the service in a professional and meaningful way.

   Original SCOT director Lynn Sorenson “determined that her observers would go into classrooms with two things clearly understood: (1) [SCOTs] are there very much as the faculty member’s employee. They are there to help as the faculty member directs. (2) They fully understand the difference between observations and opinions.”² From the beginning, SCOT services have functioned within these guidelines. Some professors want a lot of feedback; others request only that a class be video recorded. Still others are not interested in traditional SCOT services but simply want a concerned individual to act as a sounding board as they work through their concerns. Scott E. Ferrin, associate professor of law and education, described his experience with the SCOT program as “a lot like therapy.” He further explained, “It’s a reflective, powerful thing. I come up with the answer myself, with them urging it out of me.”³

   Closely related to Dr. Ferrin’s comment is a key characteristic of the SCOT service: total, unequivocal confidentiality (except as recorded in formal reports of a limited audience, as

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¹ *Students Consulting on Teaching: Student Handbook* (available from BYU Center for Teaching and Learning, 3800 HBLL, Provo, UT).


explained in the following section). Students understand that earning and maintaining faculty trust is a “sine qua non”\(^4\) of their employment. The program won’t function without it.

Further, SCOTs never observe a course for which they’re registered, nor do they work with a professor who is likely to evaluate them in any other context. Consequently, students can be totally candid in their observations (although tactful responses are strongly encouraged).

**How a SCOT Assignment Works: From Beginning to End**

When a professor initiates a request for SCOT support, the process begins. Here’s how it occurs, from start to finish:

- The SCOT student coordinator gives the instructor’s contact information to the student consultant and the student consultant’s contact information to the instructor. The SCOT coordinator also gives the instructor a copy of the *SCOT Faculty Handbook* and Instructor Evaluation form. The student consultant is responsible to contact the instructor as soon as possible to arrange an initial meeting.
- The instructor and student consultant meet to become acquainted and clarify expectations.
- The student consultant visits the instructor’s class and performs the service(s) selected by the instructor.
- The student consultant prepares written and verbal feedback for the instructor and sends a copy of this feedback as a Microsoft Word attachment to the SCOT student coordinator. This is the case even if the student consultant is continuing the evaluation and performing

\(^4\) An essential element or condition (thefreedictionary.com).
additional services for the professor. The student consultant also keeps the student coordinator updated on the progress of the assignment.

- The student consultant meets with the instructor to provide him or her with written and oral feedback as often as the instructor requests.

- After the student consultant completes the evaluation for the initial service, the instructor can choose to continue or end participation in the program. The instructor may also elect to work with a different student consultant to obtain another perspective.

- When the instructor is ready to discontinue participation, the student consultant reminds him or her to complete an evaluation form and return the form to the SCOT student coordinator.

- At the end of the assignment, the student consultant completes an electronic version of the SCOT student evaluation form and sends it to the SCOT student coordinator. The SCOT includes copies of any remaining reports prepared for the instructor.5

Incidentally, an assignment may involve a simple one-hour classroom observation, an entire semester’s worth of close collaboration between professor and student consultant, or just about anything in between.

Final Thoughts

Some might argue that using student consultants is not as helpful or effective in improving teaching and learning as engaging the services of a professional educational consultant. Lynn Sorenson addressed this concern perfectly: “Critics sometimes raise objections to the idea of student consultants: ‘They are just students; how can they help faculty?’ They are

5 Students Consulting on Teaching: Student Handbook (available from BYU Center for Teaching and Learning, 3800 HBLL, Provo, UT).
students, and that is their strength. They are not experts on content, but as experienced students, they are experts about sitting in classes, understanding new concepts, and creating their own learning. They have developed a strong sense about activities that are conducive to their learning, and their voices and perspectives merit attention [italics added].”

Although at times the complexity of a professor’s concern will require more experience and in-depth assistance—at which point a professional teaching and learning consultant does enter the scene—student consultants remain a highly beneficial option for professors who seek to improve their teaching.

The SCOT program is an exciting and rewarding experience for both faculty and students. “Student consultants working [almost as peers] with faculty allows an opportunity for personal growth that is rare at most colleges and universities. SCOTs at BYU seem to value these intrinsic rewards as highly as monetary ones, perhaps even more, and remain interested in this kind of partnership.” Each assignment is unique and thus offers a new array of learning opportunities for both the SCOT and the professor.

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7 Ibid., 183.