Eberly Center
Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation

To: Confidential to DJ Brasier, Assistant Teaching Professor of Biological Sciences
From: Emily Daniels Weiss, Teaching Consultant
RE: Course Feedback, Focus Group Report
Date: May 10, 2017

Thirty-five students participated in the student feedback session for your course, 03-363: Systems Neuroscience on May 2nd. After splitting the class into small groups, I briefly explained the focus group process. One person from each group wrote down the students' responses to the following two general questions: "What are the strengths of this course that are helping me learn?" and "What specific suggestions do you have for changes that could improve your learning?" Students were specifically prompted to include comments on the blogging assignments (i.e., are they interesting, valuable (comparable to other homework assignments), helpful for individual reports, etc.?)

As individual students suggested feedback, groups checked whether each student in the group agreed with each point raised. Students wrote down the points upon which they agreed; other points were discussed and clarified in the group. Dissenting views in each group could also be recorded. After 8 minutes of small group discussion, I asked groups to volunteer key points that they discussed, and -- by a show of hands and further whole class discussion -- determined whether each point had agreement. A clear majority agreed upon the key points unless indicated otherwise below. On the following pages, the main points listed (in no particular order) are those generated in the whole class discussion. Additional supporting and clarifying bullet points are representative samples that came from both the group worksheets (indicated by numbers of students) and whole class discussion (indicated by % of students who agreed). At the end, I have also added some additional notes on the "jigsaw" class discussion activity that we discussed in our post-focus group meeting.

<u>Summary of Student Feedback:</u> Strengths that assist in learning

Section 1: Blogging assignments

1. *Blogs are helpful in breaking apart and analyzing a scientific paper.* (100%)
    - "It helps us learn to identify what is important or not."
    - "Gives us experience reading and understanding articles."
    - "Gives you hands-on experience reading papers and learning about many topics."

2. *Material in blogging assignment papers was well-aligned with lectures.* (14 students)
    - "Helped us understand class material better."
    - "We liked that it directly related to the material we were learning about in class."
    - "Topics were always discussed in class."

3. *Miscellaneous comments about blogging assignments:*
    - "[Blogging assignment] prepared us to write the final project." (6 students)
    - "Learned how to apply class knowledge to advanced research." (2 students)
    - "Helped us develop familiarity with techniques and when to use them." (1 student)
    - "Used other group members to help understand the article better." (4 students)
    - Blog assignments and homework complemented each other well.

Section 2: Other course strengths:

- Online lecture material/videos was helpful in preparing for exams. (11 students)
- In-class activities help students maintain focus and are an incentive to come to class. (8 students)
- Lectures were detailed and interesting. (7 students)
- Drawing figures and pathways on the board was helpful, and specific medical conditions or visual illusions provided good examples. (1 student)
- Homework reinforces lecture material and is designed for reinforcement, not to be too difficult. (1 student)

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<u>Summary of Student Feedback:</u> Suggestions to improve learning

Section 1: Blogging assignments

1. *Response and recap assignments were not particularly useful.* (100%)
    - "There was much less incentive to complete these, and rarely had any group member actually read all three papers."
    - "We didn't feel as if we had sufficient knowledge to write about the paper. Recaps were pretty redundant."
    - Suggestion – Only require each student to read one paper, and have a structured group discussion (with a deliverable) to summarize all three papers together.

2. *Blog assignment logistics were not always ideal.* (90%)
    - "Space out blog and homework due dates so they don't fall over the same week."
    - "Don't split up an assignment over Carnival week."
    - Four-member groups felt like the fourth paper was never emphasized later, and thought it resulted in additional, unnecessary work. (100% of four-person group members agreed)

3. *Miscellaneous comments about blogging assignments:*
    - "If group members submit their work late or don't do it, we can't do the later parts." (1 student)
    - "Have fewer blogging assignments." (8 students)
    - "Provide more time in-class to discuss questions about the papers." (4 students)

Section 2: Other course suggestions:

- "Make a more regular homework schedule." (1 student)
- "In-class discussions aren't always helpful because sometimes no one knows what is going on." (4 students)
- "Physics material in the first week of class did not seem connected to the rest of the course." (4 students)
- "Final project report was too long." (2 students)
- "Provide a more organized (printed/typed) graph or diagram to start from because board work can be hard to follow." (50% agreed)

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Note on Jigsaw Class Discussions

1. Assign each student a paper (A, B, or C) as a blogging assignment outside of class.
2. In class, have all of Group A, all of Group B, and all of Group C meet together to come up with a list of key points. These lists can be submitted as deliverables, or not.
3. Then, divide groups into the mixed A, B, and C teams and have them share the key points that were developed in Step 2. Prompt questions or structured group activities can be done here, with or without a deliverable for the group to turn in.