

UNDERSTANDING AND USING STUDENT EVALUATIONS TO IMPROVE YOUR TEACHING

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Auburn University Policy:

Auburn University views the evaluation of teaching as an on-going process which relies on multiple assessment measures. One of which is information provided by students using end-of-semester student evaluation forms developed by the University of Washington and adopted for use at Auburn beginning fall semester, 2007.

These forms, collectively titled the Instructional Assessment System (IAS), go beyond simple collection of data and include information designed for teaching improvement (formative) and merit-performance (summative) purposes.

Benefit of Student Evaluations:

Probably the most important benefit of student evaluation is the feedback that these data provide to instructors, so that courses and teaching procedures can be refined to enhance student learning. By highlighting instructional methods, teaching activities and student input, this evaluation can have a positive impact in improving the climate of teaching and learning across the AU campus.

Although student evaluations provide much information about student perceptions of what instructors are doing and offer suggestions for course improvement, instructors are often not aware of how to use these data to make meaningful changes. Instructors express difficulty translating student comments into action, especially when these comments are often contradictory. Following are some suggestions for instructors to help resolve problem and facilitate the use of student evaluations to improve teaching and learning.

Consult With Others:

By many accounts, the best first step in using student comments to improve teaching is to consult with a colleague or teaching specialist regarding the meaning of these data. Contact the Biggio Center to set up a private consultation to review these forms, discuss them with a senior member of your department or set up a group of colleagues to review each other's student comments. It would be very helpful if departments or academic units develop mentoring mechanisms to facilitate this collegial support. In addition, it is suggested that academic units develop and publicize a list of instructors who receive exceptional ratings on each of the individual items of the evaluation forms. In this way, an instructor who wants assistance with change in response to comments on a specific dimension of teaching (i.e., use of examples, enthusiasm, course organization) can easily identify a colleague to consult.

Review and Reflect on Teaching Objectives and Philosophy:

For student evaluations to lead to change, it is important for you to review and reflect on course objectives, teaching philosophy, and student responsibility, learning outcomes and teaching methods. Ask yourself questions such as "What did I want to accomplish in this course? How well were these objective met? How do student's comments correspond to my assessment?" It may be very helpful to first review your teaching philosophy statement to identify what you say are important factors in student learning and what kind of learning environment you are trying to create in your classes. Reflecting on these behaviors or factors can help you create variables to assess from your IAS reports.

Review your syllabus, or share your syllabus with a colleague for review to get another perspective, to see if modifications can directly address student comments. Often, comments about course organization, workload and desired outcomes can be resolved by improved specificity and clarity in one's syllabus.

It is important for you to consider your strengths as well as weaknesses. Look at what your students say you are doing well before you work on the suggested changes. Identify the teaching behaviors or course variables that contribute to high ratings in these

areas. Modification of your teaching or course should be seen in this context and future changes should not jeopardize what is currently working right.

Focus on a Few Areas at a Time:

It is recommended that you focus on a few areas for change instead of wholesale transformation of your course or teaching. Identify which student comments have the highest priority to you in terms of their importance in meeting your teaching and learning objectives and focus on them first. Change should be incremental and gradual. Get comfortable with, new teaching techniques, procedures and policies before making major course or instruction modifications.

Interpreting Numerical Rating Data:

There are a couple of ways to look at the numerical data. One is to focus on the median scores, which are provided in the IAS report. Remember, median is different than mean, and indicates the score at which half the class rated you higher and half the class lower. The median is one type of average, found by arranging the values in order and then selecting the one in the middle. The higher the median score, the higher the number of students rate you on the behavior or variable in question. Another way to look at the numerical scores is to look at the distribution or percentage of responses and group these into two or three categories. It may make sense to collapse the excellent (E) and very good (VG) ratings into one category, the good (G) and fair (F) ratings into another, and the poor (P) and very poor (VP) into a third. This type of analysis yields a different picture of your teaching than the one median score and may provide information that can better describe your student's perceptions.

Interpreting Written Comments:

Many instructors prize student written comments more highly than numerical rating scores. However, while these comments are often rich with insights and suggestions, it is often difficult to make sense of them in ways that lead to identifiable change. This is compounded by the often-contradictory nature of written comments and the disorganized way that they are presented and read. It is suggested that you try to

impose some structure on these comments by sorting them into categories. The most basic categorization would be by strengths and weaknesses, with student comments listed under the appropriate heading. Another method for organizing student comments is to group them by overall course rating; one group containing comments from students who rated the course high, another with comments from less satisfied students. This puts the comments into a context that may be helpful for interpretation and future change.

Constructing a graph can also facilitate organization of written comments. First, make a chart listing the four or five characteristics you believe lead to effective college teaching. You could also refer to your teaching philosophy statement or course objectives to determine what you are trying to achieve in your teaching. You can then place student comments under the characteristic with which it most closely relates. Place a minus sign (-) next to negative comments and a plus sign (+) next to the positive comments. Tally up the plusses and minuses at the bottom as a way to highlight and summarize the comments and provide direction for change.

Example: Analyzing Student Written Comments

Characteristics of Effective Teaching	+	-	Conclusions/Change
Organization	√√√√	√	
Clarity		√√√√√	
Challenge		√√√√√	
Communication Skills	√√√√	√	
Concern	√√√√√		
Group Work	√√√	√√	

Other Factors to Consider:

Some other facts about student ratings that should be considered when trying to interpret the results for teaching improvement or personnel purposes:

- student ratings are generally reliable and valid;
- the instructor not the course is the primary determinant of the student ratings;
- use ratings from a variety of courses to form a general picture of your overall teaching effectiveness;

- classes in which student provide higher ratings are generally the classes from which students learn more;
- for personnel decisions, numerical student ratings tend to overlap considerably with written comments;
- in general age, and years of teaching experience do not correlate to student ratings;
- faculty gender is generally not associated with student ratings;
- faculty who demonstrate higher positive self esteem, energy and enthusiasm tend to get higher ratings;
- research productivity is not correlated with either high or low student ratings;
- class size moderately influences student ratings with students in smaller classes giving higher ratings;
- time of day does not influence ratings;
- regular faculty receive higher ratings than GTAs;
- student motivation and expected grades are correlated to ratings with students who are more motivated and who work harder and those who expect higher grades providing higher ratings;
- students in lower level courses give lower ratings than those in higher level courses;
- students in required courses give lower ratings than those in elective courses;
- academic field makes a difference—students in math and engineering courses give lower ratings than those in social science type courses, which in turn receive lower ratings than courses in the humanities and the arts;
- students give higher ratings in difficult courses where they have to work hard;
- adequate instructor-level reliability may be obtained when ratings are aggregated across at least seven classes;
- ratings from courses with fewer than 15 students should be viewed conservatively;
- using multiple evaluation methods, not just student ratings will provide the most accurate picture of your teaching effectiveness and the highest quality of suggestions for teaching improvement.

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