Rating My Professors: Influences on Student Ratings and Faculty Beliefs about those Influences

NSSE national survey of student engagement
FSSE faculty survey of student engagement

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Abstract

Little research exists regarding the differences between student and faculty perceptions of what influences how students respond to end-of-course evaluations. This study provides evidence of both similarities and differences between what influences students' course evaluation ratings and faculty members' perceptions of what influences student ratings. The differences offer insight into how both faculty and students perceive the purpose, use, and results of these evaluations. Findings also indicate that different types of students have different perceptions in how evaluation results are used, and different types of faculty use these results more or less frequently. Finally, connections are made between perceptions of campus support and perceptions of whether or not results are used to improved courses and teaching.

Literature

Course evaluations are by far the most popular and highly utilized form of teaching assessment at colleges and universities (Aleamoni, 1987; Jones, 2012; Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Mukherji & Rustagi, 2008; Kogan et al., 2010). Higher education institutions use end-of-course evaluations to provide feedback to faculty for improving teaching, course structure and content, as a measure of teaching effectiveness for tenure and promotion, and sometimes as a source of information for student use when selecting courses and instructors (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Vulcano, 2007; Aleamoni, 1997; McKeachie, 2007; Cox et al., 2011).

The literature indicates a disconnect between the way students and faculty perceive the factors that influence student responses to end-of-course evaluation. Prior research suggests that both academic and nonacademic considerations influence student perceptions regarding course evaluations. Researchers posit that students who feel academically challenged or have above-average workloads in courses grant higher ratings (Mukherji & Rustagi, 2008; Sojka et al., 2002). Evaluations also tend to be higher in classes where students feel they have learned more (Mukerji & Rustagi, 2008). Research also suggests that nonacademic influences, such as prior motivation of students, as well as personal characteristics of the instructor (rank, gender, personality), and overall instructor likeability influence student responses to end-of-course evaluations (Mukerji & Rustagi, 2008; Kogan et al., 2010; McKeachie, 2007; Vulcano, 2007). Students tend not to agree that end-of-course evaluations encourage faculty to inflate grades, that they impact the careers of faculty members, or that they lead to changes in courses or in teaching styles (Cox et al., 2011; Sojka, 2002).

Conversely, faculty generally believe that students rate easier, more entertaining instructors with likeable personalities highly, and that students do not take end-of-course evaluations seriously (Sojka, 2002). Faculty also believe students give higher evaluations in courses where they expect a high grade, and that grade inflation and lower course workloads have a positive impact on course evaluations. Faculty also strongly believe that to receive higher evaluations, they need to demand less from students, and feel that negative course evaluations can seriously jeopardize one's career (Cox et al., 2011; Sojka, 2002; Sperber, 2005; Mukherji & Rustagi, 2008).

While studies suggest faculty *believe* that changes to course content and teaching style are made as a result of course evaluations, few faculty *actually use* the data gathered in course evaluations as impetus for improving teaching practices or making significant changes to course content and assignments (Sojka, et al., 2002; Jones, 2012; Nasser & Fresko, 2002). Nasser and Fresko (2002) report that the use of course evaluation results to improve instruction increases the willingness and ability of faculty to make changes. Course evaluation data also have little impact on faculty attitudes toward evaluations (Cox et al., 2011; Sojka, 2002; Mukherji & Rustagi, 2008).

Cox et al. (2011) suggest institutional characteristics, such as Carnegie classification or selectivity, have greater influence on faculty perceptions and practices of incorporating course evaluation results into curricular changes than do institutional policies. However, policies may impact the behavior, outcomes, or perceptions of other institutional stakeholders. The literature suggests that organizational culture is reflected in assumptions and shared beliefs of faculty. A supportive campus environment that promotes continuous improvement in instruction and pedagogical approaches involves commitment to and support of teaching and its improvement from academic leaders and senior administrators, shared values about the importance of teaching among administrators and faculty, and creating faculty ownership through the planning and implementation of activities and programs to improve teaching (Paulsen & Feldman, 1995; Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Nasser & Fresko, 2002). If an institution espouses a supportive campus environment for students, faculty culture will also support effective teaching practices that will impact student learning experiences (Tevin, 1997; Paulsen & Feldman, 1995; Cox et al., 2011).

See more details of this study at nsse.iub.edu/html/pubs.cfm

Student Data Source and Sample

- From the 2013 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement
- 2667 (35%) first-year students and 4,856 (65%) seniors

Student Characteristics (FY/SR):
- 64/66% Female
- 7/5% Asian
- 20/14% Black/Af. Am.
- 11/13% Hisp./Latino
- 49/54% White
- 10/9% Other/Multiracial
- 8/6% International
- 55/59% First-generation
- 87/55% Traditional age
- 3/7% Veteran
- 8/10% Diagnosed disability
- 6/8% GLBQ
- 95/78% Full-time
- 13/55% Transferred
- 2/11% All classes online
- 6/9% Fraternity/sorority
- 59/12% Living on campus
- 5/9% Student-athlete
- 27/26% Aspire to BA
- 40/46% Aspire to MA
- 27/24% Aspire to doctorate or professional degree
- 7/9% Arts & Humanities
- 12/8% Biological Sciences
- 6/4% Physical Sciences
- 10/11% Social Sciences
- 13/17% Business
- 3/3% Communications
- 9/12% Education
- 11/7% Engineering
- 18/15% Health Professions
- 6/6% Social Svce. Professions
- 15/11% more than one major

Student Results

Research Question 1: How do perceptions of students and faculty differ regarding what influences student responses to end-of-course evaluations?

Mean scores for student-reported factors influencing evaluations were rank-ordered to see the top and bottom influences.

Most influential:
- **How clearly the instructor explained difficult material**
- Instructor knowledge of course content
- **How the instructor interacted with students**

Least influential:
- How much assignments interested you
- The grade you [the student] expect to receive
- **Whether the course was required or an elective**

Research Question 2: Are there demographic differences on how much students perceive results are used to improve courses and teaching?

T-tests, Cohen's *d* effect sizes, and ANOVAs were computed to examine differences in students perceptions of how faculty use course evaluation results by various student characteristics. Student characteristics examined include gender, race/ethnicity, age, educational aspiration, first-generation status, international student status, veteran status, disability, transfer status, enrollment status, living on campus, taking all courses online, athlete, Greek affiliation, major, and grades.

International students more strongly believed that results are used to improve both course content (First-year: p < .001, *d*=.27; Senior: p < .001, *d*=.35) and teaching (FY: p < .001, *d*=.42; SR: p < .001, *d*=.43). First-year first-generation students believed more strongly than their peers that results are used to improve both course content (p < .001, *d*=.16) and teaching (p < .001, *d*=.20). Additionally, seniors taking all of their courses online believed more strongly than their peers that results are used to improve both course content (p < .001, *d*=.20) and teaching (p < .001, *d*=.23).

Research Question 3: Are students' perceptions of a supportive campus environment related to their perceptions of faculty use of course evaluation results?

A series of OLS regressions were used to examine the relationship between students' sense of campus support and their perceptions of how faculty use course evaluation results. To further explore these relationships, students' perceptions of a supportive environment (SE) were divided into quartiles. We then compared students' perceptions of faculty use of course evaluation results between the top and bottom quartiles of SE using *t*-tests and Cohen's *d* effect sizes.

Positive relationships were found between students' perceptions of a supportive environment (SE) and students' beliefs that course evaluation results are used to improve courses (FY: p < .001, β=.30; SR: p < .001, β=.34) and teaching (FY: p < .001, β=.32; SR: p < .001, β=.32;), net of student and institutional characteristics. Very large differences were found in perceptions of use between students who felt the most and least supported on campus. Students in the top quartile of SE more strongly believe results are used to improve course content (FY: p < .001, *d*=.62; SR: p < .001, *d*=.84) and teaching (FY: p < .001, *d*=.78; SR: p < .001, *d*=.98) compared to students in the bottom quartile of SE.

Faculty Data Source and Sample

- From the 2013 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement
- 2,735 faculty members

Faculty Characteristics:
- 51% Female
- 6% Asian
- 10% Black/Af. Am.
- 5% Hisp./Latino
- 66% White
- 4% Other/Multiracial
- 97% US citizen
- 40% 55 years old or older
- 61% Earned doctorate
- 37% Tenured
- 21% Full professor
- 25% Associate professor
- 25% Assistant professor
- 14% Full-time Lecturer/Instructor
- 15% Part-time Lecturer/Instructor
- 23% Arts & Humanities
- 6% Biological Sciences
- 12% Physical Sciences
- 10% Social Sciences
- 10% Business
- 2% Communications
- 12% Education
- 3% Engineering
- 13% Health Professions
- 3% Social Service Professions

Faculty Results

Research Question 1: How do perceptions of students and faculty differ regarding what influences student responses to end-of-course evaluations?

Means scores for faculty perceptions of student influences on evaluations were rank-ordered to see the top and bottom influences.

Most influential:
- **How you interacted with students**
- The ease or difficulty of understanding you
- **How clearly you explained difficult material**

Least influential:
- How much the student learned
- **Whether the course was required or an elective**
- Other factors beyond your control

Research Question 2: Are there demographic differences in how much faculty use results to improve courses and teaching?

T-tests, Cohen's *d* effect sizes, and ANOVAs were computed to examine differences in how much faculty use course evaluation results by various faculty characteristics. Faculty characteristics include gender, race/ethnicity, age, international status, earned doctorate, years spent teaching, rank, tenure status, discipline, division taught (upper/lower), and teaching a general education requirement.

The most notable difference was for international status—international faculty used results more often to improve their courses (p < .001, *d*=.53) and to improve their teaching (p < .001, *d*=.56). Another noticeable difference was that non-tenured faculty used results more often to improve their courses (p < .001, *d*=.24) and to improve their teaching (p < .001, *d*=.28). Additionally, faculty with an earned doctorate less often used course evaluation results to improve their teaching (p < .001, *d*=-.20).

Research Question 3: Are faculty concerns with institutional emphasis on campus support related to their use of course evaluations?

A series of OLS regressions were used to examine the relationship between the importance faculty members placed on increasing campus support and their use of course evaluation results. To further explore these relationships, the importance faculty members placed on increasing campus support (fSE) were divided into quartiles. We then compared actual use between the top and bottom quartiles of fSE using *t*-tests and Cohen's *d* effect sizes.

Positive relationships were found between faculty concerns with institutional emphasis on campus support (fSE) and faculty use of course evaluation results to improve courses (p < .001, β=.18) and teaching (p < .001, β=.18), net of faculty and institutional characteristics. Very large differences were found in the use of course evaluation results between faculty who felt the most and least that their institutions should increase forms of support for students on campus. Faculty in the top quartile of fSE more often use results to improve course content (p < .001, *d*=.58) and teaching (p < .001, *d*=.59) compared to faculty in the bottom quartile of fSE.

Institutional Characteristics

From 30 institutions that administered both NSSE and FSSE with these questions.

- 19 public
- 3 RU/H
- 2 DRU
- 7 Master's L
- 1 Master's M
- 2 Master's S
- 3 Bacc/A&S
- 10 Bac/Diverse
- 2 Other