**BEST PRACTICES FOR
DEPARTMENTAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INTERPRETATION
OF STUDENT EVALUATIONS**

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Since teaching is a multi-dimensional activity, its evaluation requires a multi-dimensional approach. At Lafayette College, this approach includes self-evaluation, a teaching portfolio, peer evaluation of teaching, letters of support from former students and/or outside colleagues, and student evaluations of teaching. The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines for individual, departmental, and institutional interpretation of student ratings and comments, guidelines consistent with best practices in current research on the evaluation of instruction.

Recent research strongly indicates that student evaluations can provide a rich and reliable source of information when all three of the following conditions are met:

1. Students should be asked to evaluate only what they are qualified to evaluate: their general satisfaction with a course, classroom atmosphere, pace of instruction, and an instructor's influence on their attitude towards a subject matter and their motivation to learn. The responses to such global evaluative questions have proved to be the most reliable and tend to have a positive correlation with students' learning. Conversely, students are not well-equipped to evaluate the professor's knowledge and disciplinary expertise, educational use of technology, grading practices, and appropriateness of course materials for the achievement of course goals.

2. Faculty members and administrators who interpret student ratings should employ appropriate guidelines.

3. Students should be informed of the purpose of the evaluation.

<u>Administration of Forms</u>

- Students should be told in advance when forms will be distributed. A majority of students should be present on the specified day.
- Evaluation should take place during the last two weeks of the term at the beginning of a class period. It should not be conducted on the day of a test or quiz.
- The instructor should read aloud the "yellow sheet," which emphasizes the importance of student evaluations and their role in personnel decisions.
- To preserve student anonymity, the instructor should leave the classroom while evaluation is taking place. However, he or she may ask another instructor to monitor the process as long as a responsible student proctor is selected to distribute and collect the forms.
- The instructor writes the date and time of evaluation on the envelope. It is recommended that the student proctor deliver completed forms in the sealed envelope to the appropriate administrative office within an hour.

<u>Interpretation of Forms</u>

General Guidelines

- As a general practice, faculty members should interpret student evaluations using the descriptions of "quality teaching" provided in the *Faculty Handbook*.
- Student ratings from different course levels and types should be appropriately contextualized. Elective courses in the major and courses with small enrollments tend to receive higher ratings than required courses and courses with large enrollments.

- Consistent patterns observable over a number of semesters should be identified. Results for single courses that do not align with overall trends should not be unduly emphasized. This holds when the outlier is high or low relative to other data.
- The evaluation of courses with a small number of students (i.e. less than 10) is not reliable. However, when multiple iterations of a course are considered together, they can provide useful information.
- Possible "biasing effects"— academic field, expected grade, workload, motivation, students' course level, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity—need to be acknowledged, particularly in courses that ask students to confront issues outside their comfort zone.

Numerical Ratings

- Numerical ratings should not be accorded a precision they do not possess.
- Frequency distributions (e.g. number of responses in categories such as "excellent," "very good," "good," "fair," and "poor") provide more rich information than medians and means alone.
- Numerical ratings should not be used in isolation to rank or categorize faculty for salary decisions or professional awards.

Written Comments

- Written comments are especially useful for the improvement of instruction.
- Isolated comments should be treated with caution, and trends and patterns over time identified.
- Evaluators should be sensitive to the "psychological power" of the negative comment. Negative comments tend to register more strongly than do positive ones.
- A single negative comment should not be used or cited by departments or PTR as a reason for a negative personnel decision.

## References

Below are several resources that offer summaries of the literature on student evaluations. These documents and their references are valuable resources for members of the faculty who would like additional information.

Berk, Ronald A. and Wilbert J. McKeachie. *Top 10 Flashpoints in Student Ratings and the Evaluation of Teaching: What Faculty and Administrators Must Know.* Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2013.

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Boring, Anne. "Gender Biases in Student Evaluations of Teachers." *Documents de Travail de l'OFCE. Observatoire Francais des Conjonctures Economiques* (OFCE), April 2015.

Buller, Jeffrey L. *Best Practices in Faculty Evaluation: A Practical Guide for Academic Leaders.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012.

Cashin, William E. "Student Recommendations of Teaching: Recommendations for Use," *IDEA Paper* 22. [1990].

Dewar, Jacqueline M. "Helping Stakeholders Understand the Limitations of SRT Data: Are We Doing Enough?" *New Forums Press* 25, no. 3 [2011]: 1-5.

MacNell, Lillian, Adam Driscoll, Andrew N. Hunt, "What's in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching. *Innovations in Higher Education* 49 [2015]:291-303.

McGlone, Matthew. "Report on Best Practices for the Use and Interpretation of Student Evaluations."  Evaluation and Enhancement of Instruction Committee report to the Lafayette College Faculty.  Lafayette College Faculty minutes, April 2001, attachment 4.

Ottoboni, Kellie, Anne Boring, and Philip Stark. "Student Evaluations of Teaching (Mostly) Do Not Measure Teaching Effectiveness." *ScienceOpen Research*, January 7, 2016.

Seldin, Peter.  *Evaluating Faculty Performance: A Practical Guide to Assessing Teaching, Research, and Service.*  Bolton, MA:  Anker, 2006.