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## Student Course Evaluations at the University of Utah

Background. A large amount of energy is expended annually on student course evaluations at college campuses across the United States and internationally, with ambiguous results. Students evaluate courses and instructors as frequently as every semester; however, students view the evaluation process as yielding small returns for effort spent (Edstrom, 2008). Faculty also spend time reviewing evaluations, but often question the reliability and validity of results due to inconsistencies in rates of returns and in student ratings and comments (Anderson, 2008; Donmeyer & Chapman, 2004; Ory, 2001). Finally, administrators collect and manage student course evaluations to establish a process for personnel development and retention, promotion and tenure decisions, but are often uncertain as to what processes and information are necessary for effective decision making (Edstrom, 2008; Beran & Violato, 2005). While each of the primary stakeholders understands the difficulty in developing effective evaluation systems, each also sees the potential value that can emerge from effective course feedback, (Gravestock & Gregor-Greanleaf, 2008).

From the student viewpoint, effective student course feedback provides a means to communicate to faculty for the purposes of instructional improvement. Students take their evaluative role seriously, believing they are fair and that they can identify effective teaching (Campbell & Bozeman, 2008; Beran & Violato, 2005). They also would like reassurance that administrators receive student ratings, since most students believe their evaluations are inconsequential when it comes to faculty promotions, raises, and dismissal for poor teaching (Campbell & Bozeman, 2008). In addition, students would like to use results of evaluations to select the best courses and instructors for their own plan of study, though the majority of students do not actually access results (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). Instead, students nationally are increasingly turning to commercial services such as PickaProf and RateMyProfessor (Zaragosa, 2007) when they believe that the institution's systems are ineffective. Commercial services not only display numerical course evaluations and unfiltered student comments, they also display percentages of grades earned by students, course syllabi, and amount of homework assigned. While commercial systems allow an alternative for students to provide their voice, the systems require additional effort by students, may not provide any more reliable results, and the faculty voice is notably absent, though one system has now added room for instructor comments. Consequently, students are interested in effective institutional feedback systems.

From the faculty viewpoint, effective student course feedback provides a means to improve teaching while building information for retention, promotion and tenure. Faculty will modify instruction positively if they gain new insight from evaluations, and they have already mastered content and they have learned several different teaching strategies (Campbell & Bozeman, 2008). Where evaluations are coupled with teaching assistance (e.g., the Center for Teaching & Learning Excellence), improvement in student ratings can be seen over time (Barrie, Ginns, and Prosser, 2005; Murray, 1997). In early career stages, it is common for evaluation data to be used to revise courses towards less desirable pedagogies in order to avoid low ratings and negative comments (Edstrom, 2008). Faculty also spend energy defending themselves against poor ratings and negative comments as they are aware of the potential impacts to retention, promotion and tenure. Therefore, faculty are interested in effective institutional feedback systems.

From the administrator's viewpoint, effective student course feedback is vital to institutional integrity. Since assessment of courses and instructors is required for accreditation, student course feedback serves a critical audit function. The audit function is so critical that at many institutions, student course evaluations is mandated to occur at regular intervals, and the outcome of evaluations must be made available to students and be included in faculty files. Student course assessments are viewed as ratings of teaching competence, though in order to protect faculty autonomy over their interpretation and use, reviews are seldom done systematically; in fact only extremely low ratings act as a type of "fire alarm", triggering an admittedly unsystematically administered investigation (Edstrom, 2008). Administrators at institutions of higher education are deeply invested in effective student course feedback.

The three stakeholders in student course assessment (students, faculty, and administration) regard the process as normative for different and disconnected reasons. While individually, each stakeholder may work to use evaluations for their own purposes, together they shy away from a shared responsibility for using course evaluations to improve teaching and learning, and resistance to changing the course evaluation practices may be anticipated (Edstrom, 2008). However, taking a shared approach to evaluations at the University of Utah offers an opportunity to form a partnership that will place the University in a leadership position.

The state of student course evaluations at the University of Utah. At the University of Utah, the student course evaluation system has much to recommend it; in fact, processes are so effective that the system is ready to progress to the next level. Evaluations moved from a paper-and-pencil process to an online process in 2003. Because students are prompted, with an opt-out option, to evaluate courses and instructors prior to viewing grades, our current response rate is one of the highest in the nation at  $\geq 70\%$ . Longitudinal assessment is critical to determining teaching and course effectiveness (Ludlow, 2005), and the University has a data set from fourteen standardized questions asked for the past six years. Questions can be added to student surveys, allowing the University to gather information regarding General Education and special designation courses. Departments and instructors may also add sets of customized questions. Because scores improve when coupled with faculty development, it is important to note that the Center for Teaching & Learning Excellence has delivered individualized faculty coaching regarding midterm student course evaluations to 280 faculty just since 2007.

Three difficulties have been identified with the University's of Utah's current system, and these are now being addressed following input and approval from multiple student groups, the Graduate Council, Undergraduate Council, and the Senate's Executive Committee. The first is the location of student-accessible results. University policy mandates the publication of quantitative results. Currently, students and faculty must log into our Campus Information System (CIS) in order to view results; however, the link to course evaluations is not readily visible without searching the CIS home page, is disconnected from the student process of selecting courses, and many students and faculty are not aware of its existence. Additionally, information is displayed by semester, or by subject, and it requires many clicks to get to the desired data page. While the information is technically available, the information would benefit from more visibility.

By moving the link to results onto the class schedule, the data is still protected by a CIS log-in, yet results are now connected to the course selection process. One click separates the course in which the student is interested, from the results about that course.

The second difficulty with our system stems from the difficulty in interpreting the quantitative results. Readers see the percent of respondents per option for every item, for example for the item “Course objectives were clearly stated,” students see, “70% strongly agree, 20% agree, 10% disagree,” and so on (See Table 1). While this data can be reconstructed in spreadsheet software to present an overarching picture of the class, readers are unlikely to do so in a manner that is consistent or reliable. When presented with a sample report, ASUU leadership, the Student Commission, LEAP Peer Advisors, SAC group members, and two undergraduate courses in Social and Behavioral Sciences all were unable to interpret the numbers in a meaningful way and in fact, declined to try. This is in contrast to the faculty report, where results are compiled to present an overarching view of the course.

**Student accessible results for one item:  
Course Objectives Were Clearly Stated**

**Faculty report for one item:  
Course Objectives Were Clearly Stated**

Response	Course	Subject	University	N	SD	D	MD	MA	A	SA	Avg	S Avg
Strongly Agree	85.7% (6)	58.0%	49.7%	7	0%	0%	0%	14.3%	0%	85.7%	5.71	5.36
Agree	0.0% (0)	28.7%	35.4%									
Somewhat Agree	14.3% (1)	7.5%	9.1%									
Somewhat Disagree	0.0%(0)	3.4%	2.5%									
Disagree	0.0%(0)	.6%	1.6%									
Strongly Disagree	0.0%(0)	1.7%	1.8%									

Table 1: Student accessible results from the Campus Information System page for one course on one item on one semester, compared to a report that faculty member would receive on the same course for on item for one semester.

We created and tested a graphical representation of results on multiple student groups. Initially, more than half of the students were unable to read the bar graph correctly, looking primarily for “all tall bars” as a measure of good teaching. However, when subject and University average information was included, along with a carefully crafted legend, the majority of students were able to appropriately interpret the graph and use benchmark information correctly. By placing a well-tested graphical representation of the report on the student-accessible results, readers will be able to use data correctly to make informed decisions about courses.

A final difficulty with our current system is in the name, “student course evaluations”. “Evaluations” reinforces for students the mixed message that while they are evaluating teaching and this activity is important, nationally and at the University, the data does not influence RPT decisions. “Evaluations” encourages all stakeholders to rely on student assessments as the main or sole evidence of teaching effectiveness in faculty files. Changing the name to “student course feedback” retains the student voice, gives faculty the option to respond to feedback as developmentally helpful information, and prompts faculty and administrators to fill faculty files with multiple sources of information regarding teaching efficacy.

**Moving the University towards a leadership position in student course feedback**

**A partnership to achieve excellence in teaching and learning.** We propose a new partnership to make further progress to resolve the issues identified on an international level, issues that the University shares. The aim of the partnership is to use student course feedback to achieve excellence in teaching and learning. Principles of transparency, clarity, and alignment are guiding the partnership and have guided the steps already taken. Transparency means that feedback is made fully accessible and understandable to all parties. Clarity means that all stakeholders understand the multiple purposes of feedback and the intended and unintended consequences of its use. Alignment means that we work to bring involved parties into agreement and understanding about feedback policies and procedures, applications, and

consequences. Transparency, clarity, and alignment require continuous conversation between all parties.

Stage 1 Proposal: Connect Students with Instructors. We propose that, from the Class Schedule, the instructor's name becomes a hyperlink to the instructor's web page. On the faculty web page would be displayed the (password protected) student-accessible course feedback data, including the option to display **recent, representative, and relevant** student comments.

Stage 2 Proposal: Construct a Dialog with all Parties. Students are not taught what relevant comments look like, or how good instructors use comments to improve teaching and learning (Svinicki, 2001). In order to display comments on instructor web pages, it makes sense to use the infrastructure already in place, namely SAC groups, to select comments. Comment selection would require that SAC groups be trained beyond their RPT comment review process, using a standardized, public and publicized method. Groups would be taught to strip comments that are irrelevant to teaching from the data set and the clean data would then be subjected to a systematic sampling process. We tested this method with a student group and comments from two courses over three semesters and obtained three course and three instructor comments that three independent reviewers rated as representative with 100% agreement. We anticipate that some instructors would prefer to display all comments, or to opt out of displaying comments when a) teaching a class the first time, b) their departmental SAC was behind in course review, c) the class size was too small to display comments and still protect student anonymity, d) response rate too small to provide valid results, e) the department elected to not participate, or e) the individual chose not to participate.

We propose the addition of an instructor "comments/actions taken" free-text box on the web page below the student feedback section. Inclusion of the instructor response to student feedback helps students understand how their feedback contributes to change and begins the dialogue that a partnership requires. Coupled with the use of midterm online course assessment, instructors would now begin to receive feedback about the course while the course is in session, a "formative" approach, instead of just after the course is over – the "autopsy" approach (Hmieleski & Champagne, 2000).

Space would be added on the web page to also post peer and expert evaluation of teaching effectiveness, to place student feedback in context (Ory 2001). With the addition of peer and expert evaluations, we hope to draw administrators into the partnership and institutionalize triangulation of measures of teaching expertise into faculty files.

Hypotheses and outcome measures. We are ready to test the following hypotheses:

General hypothesis one: Students, faculty, and administrators will reconsider the role of student feedback in assessing and documenting teaching efficacy.

General hypothesis two: Students, faculty, and administrators will reconsider their individual and collective responsibility to use student feedback to assess and document teaching efficacy.

- As use of student feedback increases, student rating data will become more reliable and less homogeneous due to more thoughtful completion of feedback.
- Students will use multiple sources and types of data to make course choices.
- The quality of SAC analysis of teaching effectiveness for RPT files will increase.
- Among faculty posting scores and comments on web pages, more frequent pedagogical engagement between students and faculty will occur outside of class times.
- The number of distracting student feedback comments will decrease.

- The number of departments placing peer evaluations of teaching in faculty files on an annual basis will increase.
- Average student response rates will rise slightly from the current level of 70% as students see the value in their feedback increase.

Full use of student course feedback information in the manner posited here would place the University of Utah in a leadership position nationally and internationally. Our infrastructure, including the University's student course evaluation program, faculty development programs, and student and administrative support, are ready for us to move forward.

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