

Guidelines for Interpreting Teaching Evaluations

Teaching evaluations are the most commonly used measure for evaluating faculty performance in higher education. There are at least two purposes for evaluating teaching: to improve teaching and to make personnel decisions (merit, retention, promotion). When using student teaching evaluations for either of these purposes, it is essential to follow certain guidelines to ensure valid interpretation of the data.

Sufficient Response Ratio

- There must be an appropriately high response ratio. For classes with 5 to 20 students enrolled, 80% is recommended for validity; for classes with between 21 and 50 students, 75% is recommended. For still larger classes, 50% is acceptable.

Appropriate Comparisons

- Because students tend to give higher ratings to courses in their majors or electives than they do to courses required for graduation, the most appropriate comparisons are made between courses of a similar nature.
- Map out the numerical ratings across quarters, it gives a good sense of trends and progress—look for upward trends or ‘stalled’ areas.

Written Comments

- Narrative comments are often given great consideration by administrators, but this practice is problematic. Only about 10% of students write comments and the first guideline recommends a minimum 50% response threshold. Student comments can be valuable for the insights they provide into classroom practice and they can guide further investigation or be used along with other data, but they should not be used by themselves to make decisions.

Other considerations

- Class-size can affect ratings. Students tend to rank instructors teaching small classes (less than 10 or 15) most highly, followed by those with 16 to 35 and then those with over 100 students. Thus the least favorably rated are classes with 35 to 100 students.

One Final Point

- Teaching is a complex and multi-faceted task. Therefore the evaluation of teaching requires the use of multiple measures. In addition to teaching evaluations, the use of at least one other measure, such as peer observation, peer review of teaching materials (syllabus, exams, assignments, etc.), course portfolios, student interviews (group or individual), and alumni surveys is recommended.

The following guidelines are adapted from:

- 1 a) Chapter 4, Uses and Abuses of Student Ratings, by William Pallett in the book, *Evaluating Faculty Performance, A Practical Guide to Assessing Teaching, Research, and Service*, by Peter Seldin and Associates, Pace University. Anker Publishing Company, Inc.
b) Theall, M. and Franklin, J. (eds.) *Effective practices for improving teaching*. New Directions in Teaching and Learning, no. 48, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.