

Maximize Student Learning by Rewarding Teaching Excellence

Increase the Significance of Student Evaluations of Faculty

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Introduction

Do Texas universities exist to educate students or to please their faculty? Most Texans, especially those paying tuition, would surely understand that students and their parents are the universities' customers. However, many tenured professors feel universities exist to please them. In fact, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin recently remarked that professors have "rightly come to view [universities] as 'their' colleges."¹ When employees begin to believe their employer exists to please them and not their customers, quality is bound to suffer.

To combat this problem, universities should implement a bonus system based on student evaluations of faculty (SEFs). By creating a merit-pay program to reward teaching excellence that is separate from and untainted by any peer review or research considerations, professors would gain the incentive to better serve their customers and could also be motivated to be more productive, reducing the need to hire new teaching staff.

Common Misconceptions about SEFs

SEFs have been one of the most researched topics in higher education. Some research questions the reliability of SEF results. However, one researcher explains that "The voluminous literature on potential biases in SEFs is frequently atheoretical, method-

ologically flawed, and not based on well-articulated operational definitions of bias, thus continuing to fuel (and be fueled or fooled by) SEF myths."² A few myths surrounding SEFs will be addressed in the rest of this paper.

MYTH: SEFs are unreliable

Thousands of studies have attempted to prove (and disprove) the reliability of student evaluations. Of course some researchers, many of whom are professors themselves, have found evidence that questions the reliability of SEFs, and thus they are strongly opposed to any program that would base merit-pay solely on information garnered from teaching evaluations.

However, the University of Texas at Austin Center for Teaching Effectiveness (CTE) seems to think that there is at least some value in rating professor performance. After reviewing several studies, the CTE concluded that "the vast majority of the carefully conducted research concludes that student evaluations are reliable and valid."³

MYTH: Professors grade students easier to boost their SEF results

Opponents argue that increasing the importance of SEFs encourages professors to pad student grades to improve their chance of receiving a bonus. However, various studies have shown that students typically rate professors in a similar way despite their likely grade. One report concluded that "Whereas

a grading-leniency effect may produce some bias in SEFs, the support for this suggestion is weak, and the size of such an effect is likely to be unsubstantial.”⁴

MYTH: Students rate popular and entertaining professors higher

Various studies show that teacher popularity has only a small effect on evaluations. One researcher has said this objection is “entirely without merit,” citing a lack of research to substantiate the claim.⁵ He goes one step further, saying “several studies show students learn more in courses in which teachers demonstrate interest/concern for the students and their learning; of course these teachers also receive higher ratings.”⁶

Students are the only people who can judge whether or not a teacher has provided them with a quality education. People fail to realize that it isn’t teaching that really matters—it’s learning that counts. If students learn material easier when it’s presented in a more entertaining format, then professors should take that into consideration when creating lesson plans and assignments.

In a well designed course, with clear promises made as to what the course will deliver, it is easy for students to judge whether or not the promises have been met. Students are smart enough to distinguish pure entertainment from valuable teaching.

Conclusion

Universities need to change existing incentive structures to reward excellent teachers. Rewarding good teachers with bonuses based on SEF results is one simple way to achieve this goal. Doing so would also encourage universities to shift their attention back to their customers and could lead professors to be more productive educators—enhancing educational quality and saving money for students, parents, and taxpayers. ★

¹ Thomas Palaima, “Why we should value the tenure system,” *Austin-American Statesman* (May 2009).

² Herbert W. Marsh and Lawrence A. Roche, *Making Students’ Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness Effective: The Critical Issues of Validity, Bias, and Utility*, University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, 4.

³ Center for Teaching Effectiveness, “The Research Behind Student Evaluations,” The University of Texas at Austin (May 2002) <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/feldman/index.html>.

⁴ Herbert W. Marsh and Lawrence A. Roche, *Making Students’ Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness Effective: The Critical Issues of Validity, Bias, and Utility*, University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, 6.

⁵ Michael Theall, “Student Ratings: Myths vs. Research Evidence,” *Focus on Faculty* (Fall 2002) http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/cft_newsletters/fall2003/student_ratings_theall.htm.

⁶ Ibid.

