**Student Evaluations of Teaching**

**Talking with Students about Evaluations**

*To motivate students to complete end-of-course evaluations and to provide useful feedback through those evaluations, the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching recommends instructors talk with their students about the importance of course evaluations and how those evaluations are used.*

* Tell your students that you value their honest and constructive feedback, and that you use student feedback to make improvements to your courses. If possible, share examples of how you have changed your courses as a result of student feedback.
* Let your students know that you are interested in both positive and negative feedback on the course. What aspects of the course and/or instruction helped them learn? What aspects might be changed to help future students learn more effectively?
* Describe the kind of feedback you find most useful. In most cases, specific feedback with examples is more useful than general statements. See the handout “[Providing Helpful Feedback to Your Instructions](http://crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/Course%20Evaluation%20Guidance%20One-Pager.pdf)” from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan for examples of specific, constructive feedback.
* Remind students that evaluations are designed to be completely anonymous and that you will not be able to see any of their evaluations until after final grades have been submitted.
* Let students know that you are the primary audience for their feedback, but that others will potentially read their evaluations, including department and school administrators. Course evaluations play a role in personnel evaluations and in curriculum planning.

*Vanderbilt’s Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey, Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, was* [*interviewed*](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/library/articles-and-essays/the-teaching-forum/student-course-evaluations/) *in 2003 about student course evaluations. She was asked if she thought her students took course evaluations seriously. Her answer:*

Yes, I do think my students take them very seriously. I think they do in part because I tell them that I take them seriously. I schedule a time when we’ll do the evaluation form; I tell students in advance that I consider it to be very important, and tell them that I really want them all to be present to evaluate the course. I tell them that I read every comment and find the comments extremely useful in thinking about and improving my own teaching. When I give the evaluations forms out I repeat all of those things, and add, “You can never write too much; I value all of the feedback I get, I do read it and it is very important to me.” And then I follow all of the university guidelines (like getting quickly out of the classroom after identifying who’s going to collect and return them to the department office.)

So yes, I get very substantive feedback, which I really value. In many courses, perhaps especially large ones, there is likely to be at least someone who’s not particularly happy with the course. Their feedback can be very, very helpful to thinking about what I might do differently in the course. I think emphasizing that we take student comments very seriously, and find them very helpful, simply increases the likelihood of getting very useful feedback from all students.

**Making Sense of Student Evaluation Feedback**

*Adapted from "Some Guidelines and Principles to Consider In Making Sense of Evaluation Feedback" by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey, Professor of Psychology, ,Emeritus, Vanderbilt University.*

Along with the fresh start of the new year, many instructors will receive an opportunity to assess their teaching skills when they receive student evaluations of their Fall courses. Making sense of student feedback can be challenging so we offer the following tips for examining evaluations.

When considering student evaluations:

* Pick a good time to do so, when you will have enough time to digest at least some of the information, have privacy, and can give yourself some mental ‘space’ to analyze the information.
* Track quantitative results. Consider how the summary rating received for each item fits with your own teaching goals and your department’s expectations for teaching.
* Look for patterns in students’ comments—identify trends, note what you have done well and what needs improvement.
* Take your experience into account. If you are new to teaching, the school, or even the course, you may still be learning about various aspects of being a professor, such as course design, teaching skills, student interaction, and departmental expectations.
* Take the context and characteristics of your course into account. Research shows that student evaluations often are more positive in courses that are smaller rather than larger, and elective rather than required. Also, evaluations are usually more positive in courses in which students tend to do well.

When dealing with negative student feedback:

* Know that almost *all* faculty members receive negative feedback at some point in their careers, including those who are senior and highly successful.
* Allow yourself to acknowledge that it can feel hurtful or make you angry, but also provides a pointer toward important areas for your continued development.

When deciding how to further your development as a teacher:

* Bear in mind the most frequently mentioned areas for teaching improvement in analysis of student evaluations within and across universities: 1) clearer, more specific in-class communication; and 2) clearer, more explicit organization of course content.
* Consider scheduling an appointment at the Center for Teaching for a consultation to help you interpret your evaluations. Research suggests that teachers who consult with someone about their evaluations are more likely to score higher on the next set of evaluations than others who do not discuss them with anyone. To schedule a consultation on student evaluations, call the Center for Teaching at 322-7290.

When planning steps to improve the feedback you receive in evaluations, consider the following options:

* Use one minute evaluations at the end of selected class sessions, asking students to note the main idea they learned that class, or two ideas about a major construct considered, or a question about content, and so forth.
* Give a “midterm evaluation” of the course, using the official university form or one you have created, to check how the class is progressing while you can use the information to make changes.
* Talk with the class about their interim feedback, and explicitly put into practice one of their suggestions.
* Before the final course evaluation, explain to the class the importance you place on their input.

**Resources on Interpreting Student Evaluations**

"Student Rating Forms", a chapter from the book [Tools for Teaching](http://discoverlibrary.vanderbilt.edu/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?bulkSize=1&dym=true&docId=vanunicorn1979547&highlight=true&vid=VANDERBILT&lang=eng&institution=VAN) by Barbara Gross Davis.

[**Interpreting and Working with Your Course Evaluations**](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/CTL/cgi-bin/docs/faculty/interpret.pdf) [PDF], a resource from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Stanford University, featuring suggestions for improving one's scores on particular student evaluation questions

[**Evaluating and Improving Undergraduate Teaching in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics**](http://www.nap.edu/books/0309072778/html/), an on-line book published by the National Research Council (2003).]

The following articles can be found in the journal, [New Directions for Teaching and Learning](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/jissue/86511724/), Volume 2001, Issue 87, Special Issue: Techniques and Strategies for Interpreting Student Evaluations . Issue Edited by Karron G. Lewis.

* [**Faculty Thoughts and Concerns about Student Ratings**](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/86511734/PDFSTART), by John C. Ory, Office of Instructional Resources at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "Although student ratings of instruction are used to determine whether a person is teaching effectively, many people who use them are not aware of the extensive research base for them."
* [**Encouraging Your Students to Give Feedback**](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/86511725/PDFSTART), by Marilla D. Svinicki, Center for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Texas at Austin. "Giving feedback is a skill that can be learned. What are the conditions that foster that learning and the later use of that skill for feedback to instructors?"
* [**Making Sense of Student Written Comments**](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/86511727/PDFSTART), by Karron G. Lewis, Center for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Texas at Austin. "Most student evaluation instruments include a place for student comments, yet the comments are often difficult to interpret. This article illustrates these comments and uses the information for improving teaching and students’ learning."
* [**Using Midsemester Student Feedback and Responding to It**](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/86511730/PDFSTART), by Karron G. Lewis, Center for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Texas at Austin. "Getting midsemester feedback from your students can help you make changes before it's too late."
* [**Interpreting the Numbers: Using a Narrative to Help Others Read Student Evaluations of Your Teaching Accurately**](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/93513006/PDFSTART), by Jennifer Franklin, Center for Teaching and Learning at California State University, Dominguez Hills. "Student ratings are one of the most widely used measures in teaching today. All users should understand what the numbers mean and how they should and should not be used."

The following articles are from the former newsletter of the Center for Teaching: Teaching Forum 6:1,Fall 2003 Newsletter, "Evaluating Teaching: Student Ratings and Beyond."

* [**Student Course Evaluations**](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/docs/student-course-evaluations/), by Anupama Balasubramanian, CFT fellow. In this article from the Center for Teaching newsletter, a Vanderbilt faculty member and teaching assistant discuss their perceptions of student course evaluations, and how to effectively use them.
* [**From the Student's View**](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/docs/from-the-students-view-student-course-evaluations/), by Anupama Balasubramanian, CFT fellow. In this article from the Center for Teaching newsletter, eight Vanderbilt undergraduates share their experiences with student rating forms.
* [**Interview on CFT Consultation on Student Evaluations**](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/docs/services-of-the-cft-student-evaluation-consultations/), by Anupama Balasubramanian, CFT fellow. In this article from the Center for Teaching newsletter, former CFT Associate Director Peter Felten describes his work with student evaluation consultations.

**Summaries of Research on Student Evaluations**

[**Student Ratings of Teaching: A Summary of Research and Literature**](http://www.theideacenter.org/research-and-papers/idea-papers/50-student-ratings-teaching-summary-research-and-literature) (IDEA Paper 50) by Stephen L. Benton and William E. Cashin, IDEA Center. This white paper "summarize[s] the conclusions of the major reviews of the student ratings research and literature from the 1970s to 2010. That literature is extensive and complex; a paper this brief can offer only broad, general summaries and limited citations."

[**Student Ratings: Myths vs Research Evidence**](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/docs/student-ratings-myths-vs-research-evidence/), by Michael Theall, Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Theall, a research expert in instructional design, development and evaluation, explores the myths and truths behind Student Ratings (reprinted with the permission of the Brigham Young University Faculty Center).

[**How To Evaluate Teaching**](http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Columns/Teacheval.pdf), by Richard Felder, from *Chemical Engineering Education*, 38(3), 200-202 (2004). "A key to effective teaching evaluation is to collect data from multiple sources [peers, students, instructors, administrators]...making sure that all education-related activities are rated by the people best qualified to rate them."

[**Looking for Bias in All the Wrong Places: A Search for Truth or a Witch Hunt in Student Ratings of Instruction?**](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/89016445/PDFSTART) by Michael Theall, Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, and Jennifer Franklin, Center for Teaching and Learning at California State University, Dominguez Hills. "Through a half-century of research on student ratings, the constant quest has been to prove or disprove the existence of biasing factors. What have we learned, and what has happened as a result?"

[**Questions Frequently Asked about Student Rating Forms: Summary of Research Findings**](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/studentratingfaq),” by Matthew Kaplan, Lisa A. Mets and Constance E. Cook, University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. This article answers questions such as, “What do we know about the relationship between grades and student ratings? What do student ratings tell us about teaching effectiveness?”

[**Flunking the Test: The Dismal Record of Student Evaluations**](http://www.bus.lsu.edu/accounting/faculty/lcrumbley/flunk.html), by Paul Trout, Montana State University. "Though most schools use them, numerical evaluations of faculty members get bad grades. They aren’t accurate and they’re dumbing down undergraduate education."

[**Student Ratings of Professors are not Gender Blind**](http://www.awm-math.org/newsletter/199409/basow.html), by Susan Basow, Lafayette College. This article was originally published in the *Association for Women in Mathematics Newsletter*. "The ratings of male professors are unaffected by student gender, but female professors frequently receive lower ratings from their male students and higher ratings from their female students. Female professors also appear to be evaluated according to a heavier set of expectations than are male professors, and these expectations affect student ratings."

[**Student Ratings of Women Faculty**](http://advance.washington.edu/apps/resources/docs/20030513-student_ratings_ds.pdf), by Michael Theall, Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, and Jennifer Franklin, Center for Teaching and Learning at California State University, Dominguez Hills. This article provides research findings on interactions between instructor gender and student ratings of teaching.

[**Student Evaluations and Gendered Expectations: What We Can’t Count Can Hurt Us**](http://www.springerlink.com/content/y705543672670178/fulltext.pdf), by Kelley Massoni, University of Kansas, and distributed by the Sociologists for Women in Society. "How does gender enter into students’ evaluations of their teachers. Scholars who have attempted to answer this question are divided in their findings. ...This fact sheet is designed to make sense of the research on gender and teaching evaluations."

[**Are Student Ratings Unfair to Women?**](http://www.awm-math.org/newsletter/199009/koblitz.html) by Neal Koblitz, University of Washington, reprinted from the *Association for Women in Mathematics Newsletter*, Vol. 20, No. 5, September-October, 1990. "If an instructor feels compelled to put students under pressure (assigning a lot of homework, giving challenging exams), then only the most serious and mature students are at all likely to respond with high ratings at the end of the course. Most students are inclined to “punish” the instructor. There is considerable evidence that the “punishment” is more severe if the instructor is female."

[**Gender and Student Evaluations: An Annotated Bibliography**](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/gsebibliography.pdf), at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan.

[**Student Evaluations: Gender Bias and Teaching Styles**](http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/posting.php?ID=81) by Lynn H. Collings, Joan C. Chrisler, and Kathryn Quina, excerpted from *Career Strategies for Women in Academe: Arming Athena* (Sage Publications, 1998). "The authors discuss factors impacting student evaluations of faculty performance and steps women faculty in particular can take to ameliorate negative biases."

**Vanderbilt Library Resources**

[***Techniques and Strategies for Interpreting Student Evaluations***](http://acorn.library.vanderbilt.edu/cgi-bin/isbn-search/0787957895). Karron G. Lewis, editor. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, c2001.

[***The Student Ratings Debate: Are They Valid? How Can We Best Use Them?***](http://acorn.library.vanderbilt.edu/cgi-bin/isbn-search/0787957569) Michael Theall, Philip C. Abrami, Lisa A. Mets, editors. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, c2001.

[**Book Review**](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/docs/notes-from-the-cft-library-changing-practices-in-evaluating-teaching/), by Anupama Balasubramanian, CFT fellow. A review of ***Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching***, Peter Seldin and Associates. Anker, 1999. 275 pp. This book is available for checkout from the [Center for Teaching Library](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/library/), call number: LB2333 .S435 1999.

**Center for Teaching Services**

[**Consultation on Interpreting Student Evaluations**](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/services/student-evaluations-consultation/): To schedule a consultation on student evaluations, call the Center for Teaching at 322-7290.

[Creative Commons License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Content on this site is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).