**Soliciting and Utilizing Mid-Semester Feedback**

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Although students provide summative insight on our teaching in their [end-of-semester course evaluations](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/cft/guides-sub-pages/student-evaluations/), teachers can also benefit from soliciting mid-semester feedback from their students. Unlike the feedback on formal course evaluations, this mid-semester feedback can be utilized immediately to make adjustments, clarify expectations, or reinforce the goals and aims of the course. This both ensures that your course is more dynamically responsive to your students’ needs and provides a safe, low-stakes forum for students to provide feedback that will not appear on your official teaching evaluation forms.

**Why Collect Mid-Semester Feedback?**

We know that students will probably fill out a teaching evaluation at the end of the semester, so why should we take up valuable class time with a mid-semester feedback session? First, this end-of-semester feedback comes too late for the students who provided the feedback to gain from it, and we may not teach the same course again. Additionally, though, these end-of-semester evaluations may not be the most useful means of gathering information about our teaching effectiveness or students’ learning (Frick, Chadha, Watson, & Zlatkovska, 2010; Stark & Freishtat, 2014). Indeed, because these evaluations are mostly used in administrative settings to determine tenure and promotion, they are standardized across disciplines. This means that they provide only very general information about a course—“this was an outstanding course”—that is only moderately correlated with student achievement (Frick et al., 2010). Further, our universities often provide us with the results of these evaluations in aggregate, without consideration of student variability, response rates, or the comparability of different measures (Stark & Freishtat, 2014).

Mid-semester feedback, however, can be customized to avoid these pitfalls. Because we as teachers control the timing, questions, and analysis of these more informal surveys, we can ensure that they best meet our needs and contribute to student learning. Instead of asking questions that would similarly gauge students from mechanical engineering and French literature courses, we can design feedback tools that get to the heart of what we need to know. Asking students for their input on the course also creates the conditions for an open dialogue in which students see themselves as valuable members of the learning community (Hurney, Harris, Prins, & Kruck, 2014). Moreover, it models for students the kind of behavior that we as teachers want to see in them: a drive for continual improvement with several opportunities to hear from experts, make adjustments, and consider the choices we make. Finally, soliciting mid-semester feedback can improve our end-of-course evaluations, as it will both improve the quality of the course itself and provide students with early opportunities to raise concerns with the course.

**When and How to Collect Mid-Semester Feedback?**

Now that we know how important collecting mid-semester feedback is, we need to consider when and how we collect it. To some extent, this is personal preference: many teachers simply want feedback before the end of the semester, so they collect mid-semester feedback at the halfway point. This could be a useful time, as students have enough experience with the course to offer informed suggestions, but they will still benefit from any changes we make. Some teachers, though, want more of a continual feedback model, and require students to complete a classroom assessment at the end of each class (Lewis, 2001). The key is to only solicit feedback that you will have time to read, engage with, and act on; if you ask students for their input after each class, but do not have the time to reflect on and incorporate it, students will quickly realize that their voices are not being heard. For this reason, many teachers choose to collect feedback at one or two points during the semester. It’s also important to note that if you solicit feedback immediately after a major deadline—a paper or a midterm, for example—you are likely to get feedback that primarily relates to that assessment, rather than to the class as a whole.

It is important to collect feedback in a way that enables students to be completely honest and forthcoming. Teachers achieve this anonymity in a number of ways. If your interaction with students’ written work is almost exclusively through typed documents, you may not know your students’ handwriting and could therefore just ask students to complete forms anonymously, in class without technology. If you worry, though, that students will not be able to be completely truthful if they handwrite their answers, you could create an online survey using Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, or another survey software, and tell your students to be sure to bring a laptop to class to complete the form. Regardless of the method of collection, teachers should ensure that students have ample class time to complete their feedback forms: you may consider devoting the last 15 minutes of a class period to feedback, and depending on your relationship with your students, you may want to leave the room and allow students to dismiss themselves.

As with end-of-semester course evaluations, it is useful to prepare your students for what they are doing and how they can be helpful to you. You can start off by sharing how you plan to use the feedback in future class sessions. You may also want to identify unhelpful feedback so students know what to avoid (e.g., “you’re younger than I expected,” “I wish this class weren’t a requirement,” or “everything is good”). Additionally, you could stress the importance of specific, relevant comments that focus on the course and your teaching, rather than on your clothing, voice, or ethnicity.

**What to Collect as Mid-Semester Feedback?**

As you design your mid-semester feedback forms, it’s important to consider what information you want feedback on. As you consider the questions you may ask your students, it may be helpful to review the goals and learning objectives of your course. Then, consider the pedagogical choices that you’ve made in service of meeting those goals, and determine where you would like student input. Because you want your feedback to be actionable, it’s important to ask students focused questions that you could make changes around (Lewis, 2001). For example, you may want to know if you’re moving too quickly through some material, if you’re not solving enough problems in class, or if your readings don’t clearly cohere together. The more specific you can be, the less likely you are to hear that your class is “great” or “boring,” neither of which are easily actionable pieces of feedback.

You may want to create your mid-semester feedback form in a way that is completely tailored to your course, or you may want to use a form we’ve created (see below). Either way, you should think carefully about what you’d like feedback on. For example, you may want to gauge how confident students feel about the material, the pace at which you’re moving through the class, the usefulness of formative assessments, or the amount of out-of-class time students devote to the course. You may want to determine students’ responses to your teaching style, your use of lecture, your inclusion of group work, or the creation of reading guides. Spend some time really considering what you want to learn from your students.

Perhaps you are more interested in a quick and easy understanding of students’ experiences and preferences. You could distribute index cards and ask students three questions:

1. What would you like to see more of?
2. What would you like to see less of?
3. What would like to see done differently?

Alternatively, you could ask three different questions (e.g., “what are you having difficulty with?”, “what would you change about the course if you could?”, or “when do you learn best in the course?”). The key is to make the questions specific enough to provide necessary information, but broad enough that students can share their experiences.

You may also want to ask students closed questions for which they indicate how true a statement is (e.g., “The instructor of this course indicates where the class is going”). Below are two example feedback forms that you could alter to suit your needs.

[Form A](https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-wp0/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2019/07/16133924/Form-A.doc) [9 Likert-style questions about the student and the instructor; 3 open-ended questions]
[Form B](https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-wp0/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2019/07/16133925/Form-B.doc) [15 Likert-style questions about the instructor; 2 open-ended questions]

**What to Do with Mid-Semester Feedback?**

Once you’ve decided when, how, and what to collect as mid-semester feedback, the real work begins! What you choose to do with the feedback is as important as soliciting it in the first place, so it’s important to consider how you will move forward with your students’ responses. Some important considerations:

**Report results back to students promptly**. It’s important that students understand that you have read and considered their feedback; otherwise, they may feel as though their time has been wasted or that you do not care about their insights. Therefore, it’s useful to share back with students what they and their peers have said the class period after you’ve solicited their responses. Additionally, this provides contexts for students: they can see how common their perceptions are and the places where they differ from their peers. For example, one student may have shared that they would appreciate fewer quizzes, but several other students may have indicated that the frequent quizzes were helpful for their learning. When sharing back with students, feel free to highlight the contradictions and confusions that you might see (for example, “six students said we spent too much time talking about the readings, but four students felt we didn’t spend enough time with the readings”; “twelve students thought the reading questions were not useful, but ten students indicated that the reading guides focused their understanding”). Not only does this remind each student that they are not the only one in the class, but it also emphasizes that every choice an instructor makes may please some students while upsetting others.

**Critically reflect on students’ comments**. Remember that simply because students suggest a change doesn’t mean that you need to make it! It is important to solicit students’ feedback and create an atmosphere in which students can be authentic and truthful; nonetheless, students may offer feedback that you cannot or do not want to incorporate. Moreover, students may offer insight that does not immediately correspond to changes you could make in your classroom, and it is only through careful reflection that you may be able to understand how you can act. For example, students may say that the reading is too difficult; you should reflect on whether the reading level is too high, whether reading guides would help, or whether students have the skills to read academic articles. Even if students offer negative feedback about your grading, course design, or teaching style, you may be able to reflect on [turning these criticisms into positive changes](https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Make-the-Best-of-Bad/246395) in your courses. Additionally, it may be useful to reflect on the power dynamics inherent in all student evaluations, as students tend to favor white men in their evaluations and rate women and racial minority teachers less favorably, regardless of their grades in class, engagement, or expectations (Laube, Massoni, Sprague, & Ferber, 2007; Mengel, Sauermann, & Zölitz, 2019; Mitchell & Martin, 2018; Reid, 2010; Sleeter, 2017).

**Identify patterns.** Just like with any other qualitative data, you can better understand the variety of feedback by identifying patterns and themes in student responses. It may be useful to group comments by the topic they are addressing, analyzing all pieces of feedback about reading, class pace, teaching techniques, and grading separately. Then, try to determine moments of overlap among comments, identifying when more than one student had similar feedback. If several students offer the same suggestion or enjoyed a certain class period, perhaps they’ve narrowed in on a weakness in your course design or a great lesson. It’s important, though, to weigh student comments equally—just because only one student suggested a change or praised an aspect of your teaching doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t value their comment.

**Remember the positive.** It’s tempting to focus solely on the negative feedback and suggestions that students have offered, but it can be valuable to center yourself on their praise and the aspects of your course they are enjoying. Although evaluations focus on constructive criticism, it’s also important to identify aspects of your classroom that are positive to ensure that you don’t change something that’s working for your students.

**Other Ways of Gathering Feedback: Small Group Analysis (SGA)**

The Small Group Analysis (SGA) is a method of gathering anonymous feedback from students concerning what is helping and hindering their learning within a course.  This service is provided for Vanderbilt instructors by the Center for Teaching, and is an excellent way to assess students' response to your teaching mid-semester. It goes beyond the methods described above by involving a CFT consultant to help clarify and decipher the sometimes-mysterious comments students make on written course evaluations.

Please see our [Small Group Analysis page](http://wp0.vanderbilt.edu/cft/services/small-group-analysis/) for more information on this service.

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