Teaching evaluations and students first

By: S. Ratnajeevan H. Hoole

Issue date: 6/8/07 Section: Ed-Op
Originally published: 6/8/07 at 3:55 AM EST
Last update: 6/8/07 at 3:56 AM EST

It is the end of term. Students will be asked to fill out course evaluations. At least at the college of engineering the results will be on the Web pages for the world to see. These public ratings will guide students on future course selections. Indeed, faculty promotion, renewal and tenure will be based on these here and elsewhere.

Teaching Evaluations

As a person who was successfully evaluated for tenure at Harvey Mudd College, I recognize the importance these evaluations have. As a teacher, I am acutely aware that whenever I knew I would be evaluated, I taught with special care.

However, good administrators are acutely aware that teacher evaluations have their flaws and are valuable only when done right and used thoughtfully and carefully. For example, D. H. Naftulin et al., in a landmark experiment reported in the Journal of Medical Education, showed that when an actor was asked to teach a subject with much entertainment and little substance, he obtained far higher ratings that a serious teacher who addressed only the subject. Evaluations are therefore used only for effectiveness of delivery while content is judged by peers.

Again, mathematically dense subjects get lower evaluations than fun subjects like Ethics for Engineers, where students view movies and are more easily drawn into discussions. Teachers teaching their specialty with mastery get higher ratings than teachers helping the department by teaching a subject in which they were never trained, but teach it because, say, the regular teacher was on sabbatical leave. The University Administration therefore has the duty to know how to do evaluations properly and in context.

Drexel's Irresponsible Methodology

Returning to Drexel last Fall as a visitor after a delightful three years as an assistant professor in the 1980s, I was surprised to find an institution that claims to put students first badly botch the evaluations.

In the early years of evaluations at most universities, the instructor was asked to allocate 20 minutes during class. A person from the Dean's office would distribute the evaluation forms with pencils after the professor leaves, collect them and they, once machine read, would be made available to the instructor and the administration after submitting grades. The response rate would match attendance - close to 80 percent and up. It worked.

At Drexel today, the IT madness and the compulsion to be seen as modern has made us change from paper to the electronic thoughtlessly. Since this needs the student to sit down in front of a computer, the process becomes voluntary. The response rate is some times as low as 0-20 percent and rarely above 40 percent. As Mario F. Triola tells us in his statistics book that we use to teach our
students, such surveys using this "convenience sampling" are useless. They evoke responses mainly from those who have a point to make. A valid survey must have a high response rate.

Interestingly, some large courses have multiple sections. A professor will do the lectures, leaving the recitations to others. While all recitations formally have about 20 or so students, they have a tendency to avoid some sections like, say, the one at noon and attend others. And yet, the recitations get the same evaluation form as the lecturer. Students are asked questions that apply to the lectures and not to the recitations. I am aware of an evaluation for one recitation section, attended by only two students, having 10 responses relating to lectures as though the recitation instructor were responsible for them.

To publish such unreliable data on the Internet before a public unaware of sophisticated details like teacher's specialty and the pedagogical amenity and mathematical density of the subject relevant to reading the evaluations, is irresponsible. It shows an administration ignorant of educational theory - even incompetent. And I dare say, it may ultimately lead to a lawsuit by professors who were denied another job based on such unscientific data.

Students in turn have a duty to not respond to these surveys when they ask stupid questions or when they never went to class.

**Personal Experience with Students First**

On my first day in class when I handed out a syllabus with no projects, one student threatened to rate me badly unless I introduced marks for projects and participation "with multiple measures of performance." Apparently he knew the educational jargon. When I declined, he dropped the course and took the same course in Evening College.

My second shock in my first fortnight was when I refused to accept late homework - I had advanced the previous deadline in class when I announced the assignment. Strangely, some six out of 100 students who got the assignment claimed not to know of the advanced deadline. The Dean and other department heads intervened and I was told to accept the late homework and informed that it was unknown "where it would end" if I did not do so. Strangely for a University, I was told by the Administration that the students had no obligation to come to class and hear announcements because I had not stated that attendance is obligatory.

I now take the precaution of stating that 80 percent attendance is compulsory and that copying is not allowed in exams (lest I be asked to pass someone caught copying because students can copy unless I explicitly prohibit it).

Thereafter, the pattern was for a student to make a demand while others would tell him within my earshot, "Let's go to the Dean." The interference ruined my relationship with the class and I received the worst evaluations of my 30-year university career - two something out of 5 on a 40 percent "convenience sampling." And these began appearing on the Web even before I had assigned the grades. Given the correlation between grades and evaluations, (particularly by the lower end of the class) identified by John Centra in his book on evaluating faculty effectiveness, one can imagine the pressures under which I operated when assigning grades.

In my second quarter a student complaint came via the Provost and Dean as to why I assigned a programming homework that wasn't assigned the previous year. Not being tenured and now
experienced, I simply cancelled the homework without argument. Professors do not seem to have the freedom to push students to their limits and scale back when they find that they are pushing them too far. When the administration steps in to force professors to curtail their academic demands, it does not allow the teaching strategy to play out and wins cheap popularity for the administration at the expense of the teacher and the training that students receive.

Academic standards are being eroded by Drexel administrators violating the 1940 agreement with the American Association of University Professors: "Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject." Vitiating standards to please a small section of students is counter-productive and puts the majority of students who pay for and want a good training last. Indeed, it neglects the rights of those who employ our graduates trusting that we inculcate high standards.

S. Ratnajeevan H. Hoole is a visiting professor of electrical and computer engineering. He can be reached through ed-op@thetriangle.org.