

Interpreting Student Evaluations:

Contract Renewal Guidelines are going out this week, so it seems a good time to talk about how to interpret student evaluations of courses. The evaluations are required as part of contract renewal, but all faculty should be having students evaluate their classes, at least some of the time, to monitor their teaching from the point of view of students.

The evaluations consist of numerical ratings and student comments. The numerical ratings present particular problems in interpretation for many people. When Windward Community College implemented the new evaluation forms a few years ago, I had the opportunity for a couple of semesters to see the rating of all faculty (tenured, non-tenured, and lecturers) in all classes for a couple of semesters. I was interested in this data not as a way of evaluating individuals but as a way of understanding the evaluation system.

This is what I learned:

1. Student ratings are very generous. Although 3.0 is marked "Average" on the scale, average ratings in fact run around 4.5.
2. Less than 5% of the ratings for a single item are below 4.0.
3. Less than 5% of summary ratings for a class are below 4.0.
4. There appear to be no differences between disciplines or types of classes (required vs. elective, for example) in the tendency to have low ratings.

Based on those observations, I now use 4.0 as a cutting point in looking at numerical ratings. From my point of view, an instructor who has more than an occasional class rating below 4.0 shows serious weaknesses in teaching which need to be addressed. (Almost everyone has an occasional class with low ratings. The concerns of that class are worth taking seriously, but don't see an isolated instance as a problem.) On individual item ratings, I look for patterns. If the same item shows up low (even if sometimes above 4.0) in class after class, this suggests a specific area which needs attention. Again, the occasional low rating, if not part of a pattern, is not something I pay particular attention to.

Assuming that the overall ratings are not unusually low, I have a system for looking at student evaluations. Here I've translated it into a way in which you could look at your own ratings. In a contract renewal application (or a tenure or promotion dossier) you would want to discuss what you find as you go through these questions, and particularly what you have done or are doing to address any problem areas or generally strengthen your teaching in response to student feedback. In doing this, it's important to not be defensive. Even if you believe a particular weakness stems from an area of strength (and this is often the case), it is worth the time to see whether you can address an apparent problem without weakening an area which is important to you. Of course you would also want to point out how very positive ratings reflect your efforts.

Here are my recommended steps for analyzing student evaluations:

1. Look at the ratings first: What are the four or five highest rated items in each class? Do the same items show up frequently? If so, these would appear to be your greatest strengths – give yourself a pat on the back! Are these the characteristics which you would have wanted as your great strengths?

2. What are four or five lowest rated items in each class (regardless of how high or low they are)? Do they tend to be the same ones from class to class? If so, these are areas which deserve your attention to strengthen.
3. If the highs and lows are not consistent from class to class and you only rarely have very low ratings, you are probably a good solid all around teacher. Congratulate yourself!
4. Do you have any areas which are related below 4.0 more than occasionally? These areas need your immediate attention.
5. Look at the written evaluations. Again, look for patterns. Do students' comments reflect the areas in which they gave you high ratings? Are there any negative comments or "suggestions for improvement" which are related to the lower ratings?
6. Think carefully about any negative comments. Students rarely make them so they may contain important information. Even when students say contradictory things ("Always treats everyone with respect." and "Sometimes I felt like s/he was putting me down." , remember that different students may perceive you differently.) If more than an occasional student voices the same are of concern, it is worth thinking about how you approach different types of students. For example, how patient are you with slower students?
7. Look for the patterns in student praise also. Teaching is hard work and you deserve to take pride in the large number of students who think you're doing a great job and take the time to tell you exactly how!

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