

Quick Guide to Course Evaluations for Program Assessment

This quick guide was prepared by the WSU Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness (ACE) and is intended to help WSU programs and faculty consider good practices for using course evaluations for assessing student learning as part of program-level assessment. ACE is also available to collaborate with WSU undergraduate degree programs on using course evaluations for program assessment. Contact us at ace.office@wsu.edu for more information.

Introduction

Student feedback can provide valuable insight about the student experience that contributes to effective teaching and learning. Course evaluation responses about learning outcomes, academic experiences, perceptions, and motivation can also provide useful data about curricular effectiveness, as an indirect measure for program-level assessment. For example, if students consistently comment that the same material is repeated in several different required courses, or if they comment that they did not feel prepared by prerequisites for subsequent courses, faculty can consider these comments in conjunction with results from other assessment measures.

Preparing Students to Take Course Evaluations

Why should you talk to your students about the importance of course evaluations?

Talking to students about how course evaluation results are typically used and how to provide constructive feedback can help improve the usefulness of the results.

- **Increase response rates and improve the value of results:** Students commonly suspect that course evaluation results do not get used; this is one reason for low response rates. Demonstrating that student feedback matters can boost response rates and provide you with a more accurate representation of students' experiences.
- **Improve student engagement and learning:** A conversation about evaluations can help establish rapport with students. Discussing what sorts of responses are helpful, and why, can help students understand your teaching methods and the learning outcomes. Students tend to respond better and "step up to the plate" when they understand how teaching methods connect with learning outcomes.

Help students learn to recognize and give constructive criticism

- Let students know that specific constructive comments from them can help faculty know where to focus efforts to improve student learning. Help them understand what types of comments are most useful. Most of us at some point in our lives will be asked to give feedback on the work of others (peers, colleagues, supervisors, employees) yet many of us do not get any training in this skill.
- Provide examples of useful, specific comments from past evaluations.
- Offer a list of the qualities of effective feedback. For example, feedback should:
 - be specific, using examples familiar to the individual
 - avoid personalization or emotionally charged wording
 - describe the effect the behavior has on the giver so that the receiver can experience it from a different perspective
 - offer alternatives to the behavior being criticized
 - point out strengths along with weaknesses

Talking points to use with students

Reassure students that the online course evaluation system is designed to protect confidentiality.

- When students sign in with their Network ID (NID) to access online course evaluations through myWSU or WSU's Blue course evaluation system, the NID is used to confirm that they are a registered student in the courses they are evaluating – but their names are NOT associated with their responses to the evaluations.
- Faculty do not see any results of course evaluations until after final grades are posted. Results are compiled and are not connected to any student names. Written comments are provided exactly as students wrote them.
- Instructors can see response rates while the course evaluation is open, but no results.
- If students can receive credit for completing a course evaluation (an option in some classes), before grades are due their instructors can access a list of the names of students who completed the course evaluation. No results are available with the list of names.

Faculty and programs can use course evaluation results to improve courses and teaching.

- Let students know that their feedback is valued, that their experiences help the program make decisions about courses and the curriculum. Provide students with examples of changes that have been made in the past as a result of course evaluations and/or identify something that was continued based on positive student responses.
- Courses and curriculum are always evolving, so student feedback about their experience in their courses is critical to instructors and programs.
- There are some things you cannot change or may choose not to change, so let the students know your reasons and what your goal is (you will not eliminate exams, for example, because they assess certain learning outcomes).
- Note that since students have different learning styles, you can't make things perfect for each of them; as you are balancing many needs and styles. For example, it's useful for students who don't like discussions to see that many other students do.

Interpreting Course Evaluation Results

Programs can use course evaluation results to examine what the student experience is like in their courses and in the curriculum overall, and watch for patterns in course evaluations over time.

Programs can use course evaluation results as one source of data to inform decisions about the curriculum and consider these responses in conjunction with other sources of information, such as assessment results from other direct and indirect measures. If warranted, they can review the curriculum and make changes in course material or course requirements for the major.

Making Sense of Likert-scale Responses

When examining responses to Likert-scale questions (questions with a rating scale such as Strongly Agree/Agree/ Disagree/Strongly Disagree), look for patterns. For example:

- Combine positive and negative response groups: What's the combined percentage of positive choices (i.e., agree and strongly agree) and of negative choices (disagree and strongly disagree)?
- Are there two adjoining response groups that total more than 50% of the students?
- What are the two largest response groups?

Making Sense of Open-box Responses (Comments)

As qualitative data, student comments need to be sorted and analyzed like any other data to make sense of them and to get the most value out of them. As is true for the results as a whole, comments should always be considered in conjunction with other sources of information.

Because course evaluations are anonymous for students, sometimes they feel free to leave a nasty comment that is not well-considered or a broad laudatory comment without specifics—and sometimes the results can contain both negative and positive comments about the same topic, leaving the program wondering how to make sense of the seeming contradiction.

- For very large programs, it may be prohibitive to read every student comment. One approach is to read the comment feedback from a random sample of students. For a 95% confidence interval with an error level of 10%, choose the following sample sizes: for a class of 100, randomly select 49; for a class of 200, select 65; for a class of 400, select 78.
- Be aware that the comments may or may not be representative of all students in the class, as all students may not leave comments or respond to the course evaluation.
- In general, don't give a lot of weight to "stray" responses, feedback which is very unusual (in research, we would consider these "outliers"). You can ask yourself if there is something useful behind a stray response -- try forming it as a question which could connect to other issues or students.
- It can be especially challenging to know what to do with contradictory comments, such as "the readings were terrific" and "the readings were awful." First, contradictory comments make sense; after all, your students are all different and likely have different learning styles. Look for repeated comments and patterns.

Additional Resources

- Berk, R. (2006). *Thirteen strategies to measure college teaching a consumer's guide to rating scale construction, assessment, and decision making for faculty, administrators, and clinicians*. Sterling, Va.: Stylus Pub.
- The IDEA Center (2012). *Student Ratings of Teaching: A Summary of Research and Literature*. Manhattan, KS: The IDEA Center.
- Theall, M. and Franklin, J. (1991). Using Student Ratings for Teaching Improvement. In *Effective Practices for Improving Teaching*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 48. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.