Student Ratings
Frequently Asked Questions

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Why evaluate teaching?

In general, the evaluation of teaching serves two broad purposes:

1. **Provide feedback on faculty’s teaching** from students, peers, and supervisors to understand strengths and weaknesses and improve teaching.
2. **Collect data to evaluate faculty and courses** in regard to faculty rank and status and decisions about courses, programs, and faculty assignments.

Where can data be collected to evaluate teaching?

There are three primary data sources for collecting data on teaching, each offering a unique perspective:

1. **Students** are in the best position to report on the day-to-day functioning and activities of a course and provide feedback on their own learning experiences (Chism, 1999; Theall & Franklin, 2001).
2. **Peers** are in the best position to provide feedback on course content and design and an instructor’s subject matter expertise (Chism, 1999; Hutchings, 1994; Johnson & Ryan, 2000).
3. **Supervisors** (e.g., dept. chairs, deans, university administrators) are in the best position to synthesize and confirm student and peer feedback and evaluate instructor performance in light of department, college, and university goals (Chism, 1999; Diamond, 1994).

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Why use student ratings?

Students are one of the three primary data sources in evaluating teaching: students, peers, and supervisors (see "Where can data be collected to evaluate teaching?"). Students should not be expected to be the primary source of feedback on course content or the overall contribution of a faculty member in a department or college. On the other hand, neither peers nor supervisors are in a good position to know what goes on day-to-day in the classroom and how the course is experienced by students. Common sense, as well as research, reveals that students are the most valid and reliable source for this type of information (McKeachie & Kaplan, 1996; Theall & Franklin, 2001).

Data from students can be gathered in a number of ways including individual interviews, focus groups, measures of student learning (assignments, exams), and student ratings of instruction. Of these methods, student ratings are usually preferred. Student ratings are more feasible (and typically more reliable) than individual interviews or focus groups. In addition to student ratings, assessments of student learning may be an important source of information in evaluating teaching. Some are making significant progress in this area (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Johnson, 2009; North, 1999; Tagg, 2003).

Student ratings are the most researched method for gaining feedback on teaching. There are over 1,500 published articles dealing with research on student ratings of instruction (Cashin, 1995; McKeachie & Kaplan, 1996). This research shows that student ratings are generally a reliable and valid method for gathering data on teaching (Cashin, 1995; Marsh, 1997; Ory, 2001; Theall & Franklin, 2001)—much more so than any other teaching evaluation method (McKeachie & Kaplan, 1996). However, student ratings are certainly not a perfect measure of teaching. To help substantiate and extend data from student ratings, the teaching evaluation process should include the triangulation of results from student ratings, peer review, and supervisor evaluations (Johnson & Ryan, 2000; Kahn, 1993; Marsh & Dunkin, 1992; Wagenaar, 1995).

Why administer student ratings online?

- **More helpful feedback for instructors**—Online reporting provides more complete, in-depth reports that are easy to access and interpret. It also allows reports to include links to online resources on specific areas of teaching and learning.
- **Quicker feedback to professors**—The online system allows professors to view student-rating results as soon as grades are submitted. This provides timely feedback that can be used in preparation for the following semester.
- **Anonymity of student comments**—Because student comments on the rating forms are typed, professors cannot identify a student's response by his or her handwriting.
• Longer and more thoughtful student responses--Because forms are completed outside of class, students don’t feel pressured to complete the forms quickly. In addition, students can easily type their comments rather than write them by hand. This increases the number and length of student comments.

• Class-time savings--When student ratings are done online, class time is not needed to complete rating forms.

• Widespread Evaluation--Online administration of the student-rating form provides students the opportunity to rate all of their courses each semester. It also provides faculty members with student feedback on every course they teach.

• Cost reduction--With online administration there is no need for paper forms, thus, the costs of producing, distributing, and processing these forms are eliminated. Over time, the costs of setting-up and maintaining the online rating system are less than continuing to operate the current paper-pencil system.

• Efficiency and accuracy--Online questionnaire administration and data processing produces fewer errors; this is due to automation and the reduction of manual steps in the process such as collecting forms, scanning, and distributing reports.

• Flexibility—Forms and reports are more easily modified or customized to meet various needs.

What is the response rate for online student ratings?

Response rate can be a challenge because students must take time outside of class to complete online rating forms. The response rate for recent BYU semester ranged from 59% to 66%. In the pilots of the student rating system, several strategies for increasing response rates were tested. It was clear that some strategies must be employed to increase response rates; with no strategies, the response rates were low.

Some strategies to increase response rates have been identified in BYU pilot studies:

1. Response rates increase when students know about the student rating system and how to use it. A number of strategies have been implemented to inform students about the online rating system and its use.

2. Response rates increase when completing the rating form is given as a class assignment. This is true regardless of whether or not actual points are given for completing the rating forms.

4. Student-rating responses increase when students understand how rating results are used. Various methods are used to help students understand the different uses of student-rating results and that student responses do make a difference. Response rates increase when students receive some type of incentive for completing their ratings (e.g., seeing their grades early online).
How can the online student ratings support teaching?

The online student rating system is designed to promote the improvement of teaching. Resources to support that improvement are:

1. **Links** to resources and strategies for improving teaching and learning. Every item/topic on the rating form currently has a page devoted to answering common teaching concerns. These resources are currently located at [http://ctl.byu.edu/home/information/student-ratings-teaching-improvement/](http://ctl.byu.edu/home/information/student-ratings-teaching-improvement/)

2. **Consultants.** Research has shown that teaching improvement is greatly enhanced when instructors discuss student-rating results with a colleague or faculty development consultant (Brinko, 1993; Hoyt, 1999; McKeachie & Kaplan, 1996). Contact your [CTL Consultant](mailto:ctlconsultant@byu.edu) for an appointment.

Who has provided input into the development of the current online student-rating system?

**Faculty** - During Winter Semester 2002, all faculty at BYU were sent email messages directing them to a website with information on the proposed online student rating system. This website included a copy of the new rating form, a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), and an opportunity to provide feedback on the new rating form and online student rating system. Fifty-seven faculty members responded. These responses were analyzed and used in the development of the online student ratings.

**Faculty Advisory Council** - The Faculty Advisory Council has provided ongoing input to the development of online student ratings at BYU. This council approved an early version of the BYU rating form and has continued to provide periodic feedback since that time. In Winter 2002, the Faculty Advisory Council helped in revising the online rating form.

**Department Chairs** - During Winter Semester 2002, all BYU department chairs were invited to meet with AAVP Richard Williams to discuss and provide feedback on online student ratings. Sessions were held on multiple days to accommodate individual schedules. Chairs received a description of how the form was developed and articles summarizing the national research on student ratings of instruction. Department chairs have also given feedback on online ratings in the Department Chair Seminars.

**Deans and Associate Deans** - In Deans Council, BYU deans provided recommendations and approved current plans for the implementation of online student ratings. Associate deans have repeatedly discussed online student ratings and given
recommendations in the University Faculty Development Council and the University Learning, Teaching, and Curriculum Council.

**Students**- During Winter Semester 2002, all students at BYU were sent email messages directing them to a website with information on the proposed online student rating system. This website included a copy of the new rating form, a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), and an opportunity to provide feedback on the new rating form and online student rating system. Six-hundred-forty students responded. All responses were analyzed and used in further revision of the online rating form and system. In addition, students participating in online-student-rating pilots were asked to give feedback. During the Fall 2000 pilot, over 1,800 students responded to a questionnaire sent to pilot participants. In addition, 40 students participated in student focus groups. Student feedback was analyzed and used in developing the online student ratings.

**BYU Student Association and Student Advisory Council**- The BYU Student Association (BYUSA) and the Student Advisory Council (SAC) have reviewed and given feedback on the online student ratings. Representatives from the SAC were members of the original Lee Hendricks student-ratings committee in 1996. BYUSA and SAC representatives met in a series of meetings to discuss implementation of online student ratings. They provided many ideas for, and their support of, the current rating system.

**Student Ratings Task Force**- Most recently (2009-2010) Associate Vice President, Jeff Keith, has organized a task force with faculty representatives from each college to look at ways to improve the BYU student rating system.

**How were items on the student rating form developed?**

In 1995, President Rex Lee commissioned a committee to begin work on a new BYU student rating form. The committee was chaired by Lee Hendrix of the Statistics Department and consisted of faculty, students, and administrators. Additional efforts built on the work of this committee. An in-depth analysis was conducted on the research on teaching and learning, research on student ratings of instruction, and specific BYU needs. From this analysis, essential categories of student rating items were identified. Within each category, items were chosen to best represent the category and align with BYU needs. Categories that were most important to teaching and learning (as indicated by the research) were given more items. (For more information on items and item categories, click [here](#).) Research was conducted on the form, including inter-item correlations and factor analyses. Versions of the form were reviewed and approved two separate times by the Faculty Advisory Council. Outside experts were consulted on the content and layout of the form. Finally, the form was beta-tested with students to examine their interpretations and perceptions. Throughout this process, the online student-rating form was revised according to feedback and research results. The form
and rating process are currently being examined by a University task force to see where further improvements can be made.

**Why are the two global items ("rate the instructor," "rate the course") included on the form?**

Research shows that responses to overall items (e.g., rate the course, rate the instructor) generally have a higher correlation to measures of student learning than do individual items or groups of individual items on rating forms (Marsh, 1994; Theall, Scannell, & Franklin, 2000). This has been replicated in numerous research studies and in meta-analyses of multiple studies (Ali & Sell, 1998; Koon & Murray, 1995; Zong, 2000).

**Why do the average ratings for global items ("rate the instructor," "rate the course") sometimes differ from average ratings for other items on the rating form?**

Differences in global ratings and the average of individual item ratings on the form occur for a number of reasons:

1. The global items on rating forms are intended to be normative (i.e., "compared to other courses you have taken"). The specific items are less normative in that they focus on specific aspects of a course or actions of an instructor. Therefore, the global and specific items are asking for different types of responses.

2. Even though the number of points are the same on the global and specific item rating scales, these points are labeled differently. A Likert scale asking for agreement or disagreement to a given statement (on individual items) is not the same as rating a course or instructor as good or poor (on global items).

3. The individual items on the rating form are a sampling of important areas of teaching; it is impossible to include all important areas of teaching on a short student-rating form. When students provide an overall course or instructor rating, they may consider aspects of teaching and learning that are not represented in the individual items on the form. Therefore, results of overall items and averages of specific rating items are usually different. This phenomenon is observed on rating forms across the country. (For more information on the validity of global items, see "Why are the two global items included on the form?")

4. An average of the scores for all individual items on a rating form does not take into account that some individual items are more important than others to the overall quality of the course or instructor. To determine an
appropriate average of individual items, a weighting scheme for individual item scores would be needed. If a weighting scheme were developed, it would have to be adjusted for individual courses because the most important aspects of teaching are not necessarily the same for every course. Determining weighting schemes for individual courses would be a very difficult process. Of course, all discussion about a weighting scheme is based on the assumption that all important aspects of teaching are represented in the individual items on the rating form, which is not possible on a rating form of reasonable length.

**Can online student ratings be used for mid-course student feedback?**

The online rating form is only used for end-of-course evaluations. The form is designed to elicit general feedback from students about the course as a whole.

However, instructors can use the [Mid-course Evaluation Tool](http://OnSET.byu.edu) to receive feedback during the course of the semester.

**Are other universities using online student ratings?**

Yes. Many institutions are using online rating systems for part or all of their courses. For more information, see a partial list at [http://OnSET.byu.edu](http://OnSET.byu.edu).

**Where can I learn more about student ratings of instruction?**

Here are a list of references that can be used to study student ratings more in depth:

**Information on the Web:**

*Student Ratings of Teaching: The Research Revisited*
William E. Cashin, IDEA Center

*What's the Use of Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness?*
University of Illinois
[https://oira.syr.edu/Assessment/StudentRate/Use.htm](https://oira.syr.edu/Assessment/StudentRate/Use.htm)

*Ratings Myths and Research Evidence*
Michael Theall
[https://studentratings.byu.edu/info/faculty/myths.asp](https://studentratings.byu.edu/info/faculty/myths.asp)
Embracing Student Evaluations of Teaching: a Case Study
Timothy J. Gallagher, Kent State University
http://dept.kent.edu/fpdc/pdf_files/gallagher.PDF

Questions Frequently Asked About Student Rating Forms: Summary of Research Finding
Matthew Kaplan, Lisa A. Mets, Constance E. Cook, University of Michigan
http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/studentratingfaq.php

References:


Hoyt, D.P. & Pallett, W.H. (November, 1999). Appraising teaching effectiveness: Beyond student ratings. IDEA paper no. 36 from the Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development at Kansas State University


