

Some Guidelines for Interpreting and Using Student Rating Forms

Realize the intended use of student rating forms.

There is much discrepancy in the nearly 80 years of literature about student rating forms. Yet nearly all scholars agree these forms were designed to collect perception data from students. They are not designed to provide a final evaluation of teaching, but rather to collect one source of evidence in which to make an evaluation. The IDEA center recommends that student rating forms count for no more than 30-50% of an overall teaching evaluation.

Be cognizant of response rates.

Desired response rate can vary due to class size, (for example, some recommend 2/3 of respondents, or at least 80% for classes under 20, 65-75% for class sizes of 20-50, at least 50% for larger classes). More importantly, you should consider whether the sample is large enough to accurately represent the viewpoints within the class, and how the data are used (some recommend at least 70-80% for summative decisions).

Faculty members and departments can encourage higher response rates by allowing time for completion, genuinely asking students for constructive feedback and showing that student feedback is actually used to improve teaching through formative measures.

Recognize that student satisfaction will vary for different types of classes.

It is difficult to compare student satisfaction in a large-enrollment, non-major, early morning class, with a small, upper-division, elective seminar class.

Be careful when using rating forms for comparison.

- The same mean score of 4.2 could either show that the students generally agree, or that there is a large amount of discrepancy in their viewpoints (found by looking at distributions/standard deviations).
- Some researchers suggest looking at medians rather than means as rating forms often do not have a normal distribution but tend to be negatively skewed.
- Differences due to decimal places (5.6 vs. 5.8) might not be meaningful or significant.
- Combining or averaging student ratings by instructor is complicated if the instructor teaches different types of courses.
- Student rating forms are not designed for comparative data purposes.

Be cautious of combining items and over-reliance on global items.

Collapsing all items into one score assumes each item is of equal importance. Similarly, global items (“Overall this is a good course”) tend to oversimplify or be unrepresentative of the complex nature of teaching, and should be used in conjunction with other sources of data.

Look at trends over time.

Many potential factors may influence student ratings for a particular class. Generally you want to see ratings generally improving or staying high over time. The IDEA Center recommends summative decisions not be made until responses are collected from at least 6-8 courses.

Get the full picture.

Often student ratings will “dip” when instructors try out a new teaching method. Some institutions even allow faculty members to opt out of student ratings when involved in a course innovation project.

Use open-ended comments only for improvement.

Negative and sensational comments tend to carry more weight, even if they only represent a minority opinion. It is common for faculty to receive contradictory comments as this is the place for students to share suggestions as well as concerns.

Resources

- Berk, Ronald. A. (2013). *Top 10 Flashpoints in Student Ratings and Evaluation of Teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Buller, Jeffery L. (2012). *Best Practices in Faculty Evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Cashin, W.E. (1999). *Student ratings of teaching: Uses and misuses*. In P. Seldin & Associates, Changing practices in evaluating teaching. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.
- Linse, A. R. (2017). Interpreting and using student ratings data: Guidance for faculty serving as administrators and on evaluation committees. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 54, 94-106. Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, University of Massachusetts Amherst, *Interpreting SRTI Results: A Guide for Instructors*.
http://www.umass.edu/oapa/srti/pdf/interpreting_srti_results.pdf
- University of Arizona, Assessment and Enrollment Research (2001). *Guide to student ratings at the University of Arizona*.