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STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF INSTRUCTORS: WHAT DO STUDENTS BELIEVE?

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ABSTRACT

While numerous studies analyzing the pros and cons of teacher evaluations have been conducted, there is still little agreement concerning the issue. The present study examines the beliefs of the sometimes forgotten participants in the process, the students. Student responses to a twenty-two item questionnaire concerning student evaluations found students agreeing that evaluations are useful and that they as students are qualified to assess instructors. Beliefs regarding the influence of evaluations on instructors as well as how students might be influenced in making their assessments were not firm in the minds of the respondents. Significant differences in the beliefs of males and females, undergraduates and graduates as well as business and nonbusiness majors were identified.

INTRODUCTION

Student evaluations of instructors have become increasingly important and popular, especially with regard to such career concerns for faculty as promotion, tenure, retention, and salary decisions. Over the years, a great deal of research and experimentation has been conducted on the subject. Many writers have focused in upon the validity of student evaluations [2] [4] [16] [17], while other writers have concerned themselves with the possible influence of grades upon the evaluation process [5] [10] [12] [13]. Other favorite and contemporary topics have included investigating potential relationships between student/ teacher sex and student evaluations [6] [7] [14] and the questionable usefulness of the assessment procedure as a whole [3] [8] [18]. However, one area which needs and deserves further attention is in the understanding of student beliefs about student evaluations.

There exists a variety of questions which should be addressed from the student's perspective. How should faculty evaluations be used and what is done with them once they have been completed? Who is qualified to evaluate faculty performance and are student evaluations of any real significance for modifying instructor behavior? A final issue often raised is what factors seem to influence student evaluations? These are fundamental questions in research on the evaluation of teachers, and they are the concern of this review.

Unfortunately, despite the availability of carefully developed evaluation instruments, and the presence of improved methodological and technological procedures to facilitate faculty evaluations, students on many campuses display an apathetic attitude and oftentimes provide an uncooperative response toward evaluating their instructors. Many students, however, express a desire to support effective teaching and say they want to help faculty to improve their instructional techniques. Students may be resentful about being a continual source of information because they are uncertain that anyone--administrator or faculty--is seriously listening. Students see little immediate evidence of the impact of their participation [11].

Indeed, student evaluations have become too important not to be given adequate consideration. They may be viewed as useful tools for feedback to instructors, for job assessment to administrators, and for involvement to students. To improve the overall process, it is important for us to understand the viewpoints of the principle participants. Such an analysis is likely to facilitate improvements and eliminate faults in the evaluation of instructors.

Our study attempts to assess student beliefs about faculty evaluations in light of the aforementioned questions. Also, we attempt to discover if any significant differences exist according to sex, class (undergraduate versus graduate), and major (business versus nonbusiness). There exists several writings concerned with the effects of sex, academic level, and course of study upon student ratings of faculty [1] [9] [15]. In our research, however, we are more concerned with such variables in relation to expressed student beliefs concerning evaluations. We have taken this direction for three major reasons. First, we believe that through a better comprehension of students' viewpoints we will be contributing to a basis for improvement upon the attitudes toward and cooperation in the evaluating process. Second, we believe there exists a need to provide further research in the evaluation process from the students' perspective; in this way, we can better understand how they may play a more appropriate and reliable role in the evaluation of their teachers. And third, we want to discover if any distinctive patterns exist among the sex, class, and major variables and student perceptions of evaluations.

METHOD

Subjects

A convenience sample of 473 students attending a large midwestern university served as subjects in our study. Responses were obtained from 401 undergraduates and 72 graduates. Approximately 60 percent of the sample were males and 40 percent were females. There were 311 participants with majors in business and 162 with majors outside the College of Business.

Design and Instrument

The twenty-two items regarding beliefs about teacher evaluations [19] were incorporated into a questionnaire which was administered to students during regular class meetings by faculty members who had previously agreed to participate in the study. A cover letter was attached as the first page of each questionnaire and was read aloud to students by their instructors. The cover letter assured the participants of the confidentiality of the results obtained and also contained important instructions for responding to the questions. For purposes of this paper, we have concentrated on the "Beliefs" section of the instrument. Students responded to each belief item along a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly agree (scored 1) through neither agree or disagree (scored 3) to strongly disagree (scored 5).

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When it was requested that students provide their SSN before taking part in the survey, it was emphasized that their involvement in the study was strictly voluntary. About half of the students (52.6 percent) were asked to provide their SSN and 47.4 percent of the students were not asked to provide their SSN. As a check to know if students were giving their correct SSN, we selected 45 SSNs (out of 249 SSNs given) and went to the Office of Registration and Records to see if these 45 SSNs were listed in the course rosters of the specific classes participating in the study. No significant differences in beliefs about evaluations were found between respondents who provided their SSN and those that did not provide their SSN. Demographic data concerning such things as: academic major, sex, and class were also collected.

RESULTS

The extent to which the respondents agreed or disagreed with the twenty-two items concerning student evaluations is presented in Table I. Focusing on those items with relative high agreement and disagreement means (about 2.5 and below 3.5), we see in Table I that the respondents believe that evaluations should be used for giving feedback to the instructor (item 61). They also believe that students are qualified to judge the competence of their instructors (item 49) and that current procedures protect the student's identity so that they may be as honest as they would like to be (item 67). The respondents agree that evaluations are useful as faculty development and training devices (item 55) and are an important means of determining teacher performance (item 55).

Supporting their belief that students are qualified to evaluate instructors, the respondents disagreed that only instructors have the knowledge necessary to evaluate other instructors (item 52). The respondents did not agree that evaluations should be discontinued (item 53) or that they should not be used to evaluate instructors (item 51). They also did not agree that evaluations serve no useful function (item 50) or that all other performance evaluation methods were superior to student evaluations (item 58).

These results suggest that students believe that the evaluation of teaching is important and that they should participate in the process. There is less consensus regarding those factors that may influence how students evaluate instructors (items 68, 57, and 56) as well as whether instructors really use the information provided (items 65 and 66).

T-tests shown in Table II were used to determine whether beliefs concerning student evaluations were significantly different between males and females, undergraduates and graduates, or business majors and nonbusiness majors. An F-test of sample variance is also presented, and when significant, the *t* based on unequal rather than equal variance estimates was used to test for significant differences between the means.

Female respondents agreed more strongly that evaluations were useful for the development and training of faculty than did male students (item 62). They disagree more than males with respect to whether the grade a student expects to receive influences the student's evaluation of the instructor (item 68). Females disagreed significantly more than males with the belief that evaluations reflect how hard or easy the instructor grades (item 57) and that the more demanding the instructor, the lower the student's evaluation (item 56). They also significantly disagree more than males with the belief that evaluations

TABLE I
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR BELIEFS ABOUT
STUDENT EVALUATIONS RANK-ORDERED FROM
AGREE (1) TO DISAGREE (5)

Item #	Item Description		a
61	Student evaluations should be used for the purpose of giving feedback to the teacher.	1.55	0.73
49	Students are qualified to judge the competence of their instructors.	2.03	0.92
67	The current procedure for rating faculty sufficiently protects the student's identity and allows the student to be as honest as he or she would like to be.	2.03	0.98
62	Student evaluations are useful as faculty developmental and training devices.	2.21	0.93
55	An important means of determining teacher performance is an analysis of student evaluations.	2.32	0.91
54	The results of student evaluations should be published	2.57	1.32
47	Student evaluations measure teaching effectiveness.	2.75	1.07
48	Students use student evaluations to "punish" instructor, they do not like.	2.78	1.20
64	The student evaluations provide students with an effective means of evaluating instruction.	2.79	1.02
59	Student evaluation, should not be used for salary or promotion purposes.	2.93	1.17
68	The grade a student expects to receive for a given course directly influence, that students evaluation of the instructor who taught the course.	2.94	1.15
65	The instructors pay attention to the student evaluations students fill out in their classes.	3.18	0.92
60	Student evaluations are thrown away and never seen again.	3.19	1.05
66	Instructors change their behavior or as a result of weaknesses identified by the student responses on evaluations.	3.28	0.89
57	Student evaluations reflect how hard or easy the instructor grades.	3.35	1.09
56	The more demanding the instructor, the lower the students' evaluation of that instructor.	3.45	1.04
63	Students and instructors use the same criteria in evaluating teaching effectiveness.	3.58	0.84
58	All other performance evaluation methods are superior to the use of student evaluations.	3.75	0.84
50	Student evaluations serve no useful function.	3.80	1.11
51	Student evaluations should not be used to evaluate instructors.	4.01	0.95
53	Student evaluations should be discontinued.	4.18	0.97
52	Only instructors have the knowledge necessary to evaluate other instructors.	4.39	0.76

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TABLE II
COMPARISON OF BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT
EVALUATIONS BY SEX, CLASS, AND MAJOR

Item	Descriptions	Female	Male	F-Test	T-Test	Under-graduate	Graduate	F-Test	T-Test	Busi-nes. Major	busi-ness Major	F-Test	T-Test
		\bar{X}	\bar{X}			\bar{X}	\bar{X}			\bar{X}	\bar{X}		
61	Student evaluations should be used for the purpose of giving feedback to the teacher	1.50	1.58	1.16	(1.07)	1.57	1.44	1.08	1.34	1.44	1.76	1.96 ^b	(4.20) ^b
49	Student. are qualified to judge the competence of their instructors.	2.01	2.05	1.14	(0.45)	1.96	2.43	1.77 ^b	(3.33) ^b	2.02	2.05	1.08	(0.37)
67	The current procedure for rating faculty sufficiently protects the student, identity and allows the student to be as honest as he or she would like to be.	1.96	2.08	1.08	(1.29)	1.99	2.26	1.19	(2.17) ^a	2.01	2.06	1.26	(0.54)
62	Student evaluations are useful as faculty developmental and training devices.	2.09	2.29	1.17	(2.17) ^a	2.22	2.12	1.06	0.85	2.13	2.35	1.44 ^b	(2.26) ^a
55	An Important means of determining teacher performance is an analysis of student evaluations.	2.26	2.35	1.20	(1.12)	2.27	2.56	1.35	(2.52) ^b	2.28	2.37	1.45 ^b	(0.92)
54	The results of student evaluations should be published.	2.61	2.55	1.03	0.46	2.50	2.95	1.19	(2.71) ^b	2.54	2.63	1.01	(0.74)
47	Student evaluation. measure teaching effectiveness.	2.69	2.79	1.22	(0.98)	2.74	2.80	1.13	(0.47)	2.75	2.73	1.17	0.23
48	Students use student evaluations to punish" instructors they do not like.	2.80	2.77	1.02	0.27	2.76	2.90	1.20	(0.92)	2.76	2.81	1.24	(0.42)
64	The student evaluations provide students with SD effective means of evaluating instruction.	2.78	2.79	1.08	(0.09)	2.76	2.95	1.11	(1.51)	2.82	2.72	1.07	1.05
59	Student evaluations should not be used for salary or promotions purposes.	2.98	2.90	1.25	0.69	2.92	3.01	1.09	(0.59)	2.97	2.87	1.10	0.91
68	The grade a student expects to receive for a given course directly influences that student's evaluation of the instructor who taught the course.	3.13	2.81	1.07	3.01 ^b	2.93	2.97	1.13	(0.23)	2.93	2.95	1.12	(0.18)
65	The instructors pay attention to the student evaluations students fill out in their classes.	3.11	3.17	1.02	(0.05)	3.21	2.93	1.12	2.45 ^b	3.20	3.12	1.11	0.88
60	Student evaluations are thrown away and never seen again.	3.16	3.20	1.08	(0.42)	3.13	3.51	1.05	(2.85) ^a	3.24	3.09	1.07	1.49
66	Instructors change their behavior as a result of weaknesses identified by the student responses one evaluations.	3.31	3.26	1.02	(0.68)	3.33	3.01	1.02	2.82 ^b	3.27	3.30	1.31 ^a	(0.42)
57	Student evaluations reflect how hard or easy the instructor grades	3.51	3.24	1.08	2.67 ^b	3.34	3.41	1.04	(0.55)	3.35	3.35	1.07	(0.01)
56	The more demanding the instructor, the lower the students' evaluation of that instructor.	3.72	3.63	1.16	2.92 ^b	3.53	3.68	1.11	(1.12)	3.57	3.50	1.06	0.72
63	Students and instructors use the same criteria in evaluating teaching effectiveness	3.54	3.59	1.15	(0.69)	3.53	3.81	1.07	(2.67) ^b	3.63	3.47	1.22	1.91 ^a
58	All other performance evaluation methods are superior to the use of student evaluations.	3.74	3.75	1.20	(0.12)	3.75	3.76	1.05	(0.09)	3.82	3.62	1.08	2.45 ^b
50	Student evaluations serve no useful function.	3.90	3.73	1.20	1.65	3.82	3.68	1.30	1.02	3.81	3.78	1.35 ^a	0.26
51	Student evaluations should not be used to evaluate instructors	4.13	3.93	1.14	2.27 ^a	4.03	3.91	1.15	0.96	4.03	3.97	1.44 ^b	0.61
53	Student evaluations should be discontinued.	4.28	4.12	1.30 ^a	1.83	4.18	4.19	1.26	(0.07)	4.25	4.06	1.75 ^b	1.85
52	Only instructors have the knowledge necessary to evaluate other instructors.	4.48	4.32	1.50 ^b	2.27 ^a	4.39	4.37	1.10	0.21	4.40	4.37	1.14	0.46

^aSignificant at the .05 level.

^bSignificant at the .01 level.

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should not be used to evaluate instructors (Item 51) and that only instructors have the knowledge necessary to evaluate other instructors (item 52).

Significant differences between undergraduate and graduate students' beliefs about evaluations were found for eight of the twenty-two items. Graduate students were less certain than undergraduates with respect to whether students are qualified to judge the competence of their instructors (item 49). Undergraduates agreed more than graduate students that evaluation procedures protected the student's identity (item 67) and they agreed more than graduate students that evaluations were an important means for determining teacher performance (item 55). Graduate students were less agreeable than undergraduates to publishing the results of student evaluations (item 54). Graduate students agreed more than undergraduates that instructors pay attention to evaluations (item 65). Graduate students were significantly more in disagreement with the belief that evaluations are thrown away and never seen again (item 60) than were undergraduates. Graduate students also disagree less than undergraduates that instructors change their behavior as a result of evaluations (item 66). Graduate students disagree more with the statement that students and instructors use the same criteria in evaluating teaching effectiveness (item 63) than do undergraduate students. The significant differences between graduate students and undergraduate students appear to be suggesting that graduate students are less certain about the weight to be placed on evaluations and tend to believe more than undergraduates that faculty do take note of student evaluation outcomes.

Only four significant t-test differences were found between business and nonbusiness major respondents, but it is interesting to note that the F-test was significant for seven of the twenty-two items. Business majors agreed more than nonbusiness majors that evaluations should be used for feedback (item 61) and that they are useful for faculty development and training (item 62). Business students disagree more than nonbusiness students with the statement that students and instructors use the same criteria (item 63) and that all other performance evaluation methods are superior to the use of student evaluations (item 58).

CONCLUSIONS

With regard to the issue of how faculty evaluations should be used, we found as a whole that students consider evaluations to be important for feedback purposes, for training and development and for evaluating instructors. However, students were in less agreement that evaluations should be used for salary and promotion considerations. Females and business majors agreed significantly more strongly than their counterparts did with the above purposes for evaluations.

The respondents, when reflecting upon what is done with student evaluations once they have been collected, were somewhat more indifferent as to whether evaluations are used to punish instructors, are thrown away and never seen again, or are published. It is interesting to note somewhat of an inconsistency in our respondents' beliefs. They believe evaluations to be quite important and useful; yet, when it comes to the more pragmatic applications for evaluations, they demonstrate a pattern of doubt.

As to who is qualified to evaluate faculty performance, it is not surprising to find that our student respondents display a firm belief that they are competent to assess instructors and that they agree that they use criteria different from those used by faculty. A significant difference was found in that graduate respondents are less certain than undergraduate respondents that students are qualified to assess their instructors. The graduate students' response pattern may in part be explained by an acquired skepticism of the maturity of students who may indeed be much younger than they and by perhaps a greater exposure to the actual workings and results of the evaluation process. For example, many graduate students have been employed as teaching assistants and have themselves been evaluated in the past.

With respect to student evaluations playing a meaningful role in modifying instructor behavior, students had indifferent beliefs as to whether their instructors change their behavior in light of evaluation results and as to whether faculty even pay attention to their evaluations. These findings help to explain some students' disinterest and lack of participation in faculty evaluations. Again, we found that graduate students were significantly less certain than undergraduate students that instructors made no changes in their behavior as a result of evaluations and that instructors ignore the results.

A final concern often associated with student evaluation research is what factors seemed to influence the assessment process. From a student's point-of-view, the responses of this study indicate that students believe that they are not influenced by factors such as how demanding the instructor is, how hard or easy an instructor grades, or by the grade they expect to receive from the instructor. Female students were generally significantly more certain of their beliefs in the limited role that these factors might play in evaluations. Whereas, male students were more apt to admit the involvement of the above factors in their evaluation of faculty.

It was unexpected and gratifying to find such strong student beliefs in the use of faculty evaluations for constructive and developmental purposes. However, it was somewhat disconcerting that our research had uncovered many uncertainties in student beliefs toward evaluations. Gaps do exist between student and teacher understandings of the evaluation process. From a greater understanding of both perspectives, the process is more apt to be properly used rather than misused and misunderstood by either party. Now that some rather interesting uncertainties have been unveiled, we see a definite need to continue research in this area of beliefs toward faculty assessments, from student as well as instructor perspectives. Through further investigations and better communications, gaps between evaluator and evaluatee in understanding the academic evaluation process may be narrowed.

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