Accreditation Symposium
Feb. 14, 2014
St. Martin’s University

Student Evaluation of Teaching
Summary
Introduction

On February 14, ten institutions from Idaho, Washington and Oregon met at St. Martin's University to discuss mutual issues of concern in accreditation, student learning outcomes and the external pressures on higher education to produce results.

Concordia University of Portland
The College of Idaho
Evergreen State College
George Fox University
Gonzaga University
Pacific Lutheran University
University of Puget Sound
Saint Martin’s University
Tacoma Community College
Whitworth University

A part of the conversation was reserved to discuss the use of student evaluation of teaching and specifically addressed the following questions:

1. How and when is information collected?
2. What is the response rate?
3. What is the quality of the information?
4. How is the information used?
5. What steps have you taken to improve/change the process?
6. What do you use to assess faculty teaching in promotion and tenure?

The format of the discussion was open-ended and not all institutions responded to every one of the questions. Ten institutions were involved in the discussion on student evaluation of teaching.

Eight of the ten institutions (80%) collect student evaluation of teaching electronically. Most of the institutions have only recently moved to an on-line process in the past several years.
Institutional Stories

1
Information is collected on-line with a home-grown system. Student participation is voluntary. Some faculty have students fill out the evaluation within the two-week window permitted while others set aside class time to have students complete the evaluation during class time. The software has the ability to be used with computers, ipads and smart phones. For the few students that do not have a laptop, ipad or smart phone, computer resources are available either by library loan or at a computer lab. Response rate was not known. The information collected is a bubble form, is used for promotion and tenure but it was made clear that the questions did not provide useful information.

2
Information is collected on-line during a two week window, a process implemented several years ago. When the new system was implemented response rates plummeted (number not known). The institution attempted to do giveaways (Ipods) but had little success in bringing up response rates. In 2012, it was formally changed such that all evaluations are done in class. The home grown software is capable of working with computers and smart phones. The response rate climbed to 76%. Student grades are posted earlier for students that complete teacher evaluations but Whitworth does not believe this incentive is one student’s value.

3
Information is collected on paper in the classroom. Fill in the bubble information that can be easily quantified is not useful. However, all student narratives of the classroom experience for the two years leading to a faculty members’ tenure review are used extensively in the promotion and tenure process. Department chairs and IR access the results.

4
On-line evaluations of teaching began three years ago. Students have a two week window to complete the evaluations. If the student does not complete them, they are not able to view their grades for that term until graduation. It was mentioned that such a practice may not be legal. One questioned the quality of responses under these terms.

5
On-line evaluations of teaching began 4-5 years ago using Idea software. The response rate is 60%. Evaluations are not currently done during class time. Information is accessed by deans, department chairs and IR.

6
Institution shifted to on-line evaluations this year.
Paper evaluations are used for the courses offered on-site for residential students. Online courses have on-line evaluations for teaching and have a response rate of 20%. Survey Monkey is used but only faculty teaching the particular class has access to the results. Moodle is also used but access can also be difficult.

On-line student evaluations of teaching are used. When initially implemented, response rates declined markedly to 49%. An on-line, mid-course assessment was started in which students answer two open ended questions:
What is working?
What is not working?

The mid-course assessment has a 90% response rate. Faculty uses information to make course adjustments where appropriate to enhance student learning and instructional effectiveness. End of course on-line evaluation response rates rose to 72% upon implementation of the mid-course assessment. There were two benefits Concordia saw with the implementation of the mid-course assessment; an outcome that was termed “the halo effect” of the mid-course evaluation.

First, the response rate for the end of course evaluations went up. It was communicated that this is likely due to the students feeling their opinion actually makes a difference. What they say matters and changes instruction as they experienced it based on adjustments in the mid-course evaluation so they are more likely to provide information. In addition, the practice of doing the evaluation was routinized with the mid-course evaluation so it was a more seamless effort to complete the process already started by finishing the end of course evaluation.

Second, the teaching evaluation scores went up when the mid-course evaluation was implemented. Faculty adjusting instructional practice to improve student learning in a manner targeted to the needs of students is a definition of quality teaching. As such, it is reasonable that the evaluations of teaching quality would increase. Such a measure can also be considered an indirect proxy for the quality of student learning (not always, but in this case it is reasonable to consider this).

Evergreen obtains on-line narrative evaluations of teaching. It is coupled with existing requirements for students to reflect upon their work and experience so the response rates are very high.

In class, paper based student evaluation of teaching is used. Fill in the bubble responses are used and tabulated. While used in promotion and tenure, no one on campus believes the information is of value and agrees it is a large consumption of resources to implement. Students supply narratives that faculty utilize and do find of value. Institution is looking to transition to on-line.
Summary

The unanimous consensus of the group was that the quantitative “fill in the bubble” information was of very little value. The one place in which the information was useful was when an individual would be at one or the other extreme in the evaluation scoring. It was believed this occurred infrequently and the significant effort to collect enormous amounts of data for such occurrences may not be worth the effort.

A missed opportunity discussed was the idea of obtaining some information about learning outcomes (particularly in the general education). For example, an e-portfolio could be utilized in general education courses (or others) in which students must post work that is directly tied to clearly-stated learning outcomes for the course. This gives the student an explicit opportunity to understand the learning outcome for the course (rather than never reading it on a syllabus) and make the decision on what work product best represents that outcome. In addition, the student could reflect upon how that work represents the learning outcome. This type of student evidence is the gold standard that truly represents both quality teaching and student learning. Implementation is complicated but reminding oneself of how quality teaching is ultimately represented is a reasonable exercise.

In addition to a lack of usefulness, scores on the quantitative teaching evaluation form are often reported to be high and the data skewed such that there is little ability to determine variations in quality that can inform improvement of practice. If faculty members score a cumulative 4.4 out of 5 points what does that say about the low performing faculty that scores a 4.0? Is “very good” considered low performing? No institutions have gleaned any information that have helped in the improvement of student learning by looking at the quantitative information yet all but Evergreen asked the questions. Historical inertia is a powerful force, the group agreed.

In direct opposition to the quantitative scoring on evaluations, all institutions agreed the qualitative information from students concerning their educational experience was of value, was used to improve teaching quality and student learning, and was important to continue to collect. The majority of institutions use these narratives in promotion and tenure files. However, the manner in which this information is distributed varied considerably. For some institutions, every student narrative in the two years prior to review is put in the faculty file. For other institutions, access to these narratives is limited and faculty can pick and choose how to use them. Irrespective of these nuances, all institutions agreed the narrative is the most important part of an evaluation and that is should be better utilized to enhance quality instruction and student learning.

The group discussed strategies implemented on campuses to both help faculty improve teaching effectiveness and to judge if teaching quality merits promotion. Formative assessment that is firewalled from any evaluation process is the most important means of helping faculty achieve student success in the classroom. Such practices have been hit and miss at the campuses.

First, there is very little, if any training for PhD candidates in the area of instructional effectiveness so there is often no knowledge base to draw from. Second, the importance of teaching quality in
promotion and tenure review is sometimes more of an afterthought as long as no glaring deficiencies are present although this certainly varies by institution. Third, if teaching quality is important and valued, it was agreed a more effective system of support and a more reliable system of evaluation was needed beyond the student evaluation of teaching.

Several models were discussed by the group. One institution discussed an innovative approach in which faculty observe teaching and meet with the class without the instructor to obtain feedback on how the course is being received by students. It was agreed that more formative assessment of teaching quality was needed and the mentoring relationship should definitively be firewalled from the evaluation process. Developing standards (relatively simple and perhaps two or three) of what teaching quality means at an institution is an important first step so there is a commonality and consistency in the approach. Senior faculty highly regarded both in teaching and in mentoring can be assigned to junior faculty to help guide them in understanding what quality teaching at the institution looks like. Such an exercise gives faculty the skills and knowledge to deliver instruction in a way that maximizes the opportunity for student learning and success. At the same time, it sets junior faculty on a path for success in their professional career.

Separate from the formative assessment is an evaluation of teaching quality by senior faculty sitting in and observing teaching in the classroom. This process is summative in nature and held separate from the formative process described above. The group agreed such a summative method of assessing teacher quality was an important aspect for promotion and tenure review.

A unique model of summative evaluation was discussed. At the time of promotion and tenure review, faculty identify 12 student who have taken their class(es). An additional 12 students are selected randomly who also took courses from the faculty member. These 24 students are asked to write anonymous letters describing their classroom experience with the faculty member based on a specific prompt. The letters are placed in the faculty file.
Group Consensus Model

Based on the conversation, the group arrived at recommended “best practice” ideas. Not all of these ideas need necessarily be implemented but they represent the efforts that have seemed to yield the most effective information that lead to quality instruction and student learning.

1. Mid-cycle online assessment of teaching is used to guide course instruction as appropriate for remainder of term.
2. End of term course and faculty evaluation is on-line and conducted in class
3. End of term evaluation is a qualitative narrative only
4. Institution-specific teaching standards are developed
5. Mentoring support aligned with the standards is provided to faculty
6. Mentors are given training and support to ensure quality and consistency
7. Mentoring support is formative in nature and firewalled from the evaluation process.
8. Faculty are observed by faculty other than the mentor for summative evaluation
9. Student narratives of the classroom experience are used as one of the measures to assess teaching quality

A missed opportunity in higher education at the present time is the under-utilization of the Education faculty on a campus. Unlike their counterparts on campus, Education faculty members have specifically been trained to understand and create quality teaching experiences that enhance student learning. Specialized accreditation for Education programs has created a robust understanding of the use of portfolios that highlight quality teaching in addition to demonstrating the growth in teaching effectiveness based on classroom and student evidence.

There is much to learn from the Education faculty and the use of this expertise should be better utilized to enhance student learning on the college campus.