



## Student Evaluations of Instructors: A Good Thing?

By Thomas R. McDaniel, PhD

My students have always given me positive evaluations of my undergraduate and graduate courses. I still teach four courses a year because I love the classroom and believe academic administrators are well served by ongoing connections with students in instructional settings. Good for me, good for them. As a department chair, dean, provost, and vice president, I have found these evaluations informative as I considered questions about tenure, promotion, and yearly raises for faculty.

These student end-of-course evaluations are so much a part of our system and so routine an expectation by our students and faculty that I have seldom questioned their value or necessity. Indeed, one study of 600 liberal arts colleges found that the number of schools asking students to evaluate their instructors had escalated from 29 percent to 86 percent over the course of a decade. But I pause to reflect in this "Parting Shot": Are they really (as Martha Stewart might ask) "a good thing?"

I am not as sure as I once was. In recent years, academics and researchers have identified a host of concerns, objections, and questions about such evaluations, including these:

1. Are students qualified to judge the quality of a professor's pedagogy and academic expertise? And it is not just a matter of competence: There is a kind of consumer mentality at work when we ask students to provide their anonymous "customer satisfaction" ratings for courses they have paid for and, therefore, "own." It may not be in the best interest of faculty or students to assume this right and such a level of competence.

These evaluations may have an effect on the faulty-student relationship that is disturbingly negative.

2. Are students evaluating teaching effectiveness—or something else? That might depend on the evaluation instrument, the insight of the student, the personality of the faculty member, the motivation and fairness of the young evaluator, and myriad other variables that make the fundamental validity of the process doubtful.
3. Are faculty rights to academic freedom compromised by the pressures to secure favorable student evaluations? Some faculty critics point out that the power students exercise through the evaluation of courses tends to make teaching a popularity contest resulting in easier assignments, grade inflation, and entertainment values that supersede rigorous academic standards and inhibit faculty freedom to advance controversial or unpopular ideas.
4. Are administrators using student evaluations to intrude on the privacy of the classroom and to manipulate faculty behavior? Heaven forbid! (I say); but the director of the office of educational assessment at one large state university reviewed the research and opined that "if student ratings are to qualify as evidence in support of faculty employment decisions, questions concerning their reliability and validity must be addressed." Philosopher of science Michael Scriven observed that "all [evaluations] are face-invalid and certainly provide a worse basis for adverse personnel decisions than the polygraph in criminal cases."

So you see, administrator colleagues, why I have new-found reservations about student evaluations of faculty.

Are these a "good thing"? Maybe not. That's my view—what's yours?

Send your comments to [partingshot@magnapubs.com](mailto:partingshot@magnapubs.com).

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future. A recent mentee said, "I really don't think I need any assistance. I don't think I have anything that I'm struggling with." The mentor was very careful and thoughtful about responding and said, "I totally understand, but I want you to know that I'm always available to meet and try to problem solve with you. Things sometimes come up that we're not even aware are problems until later on." The mentor left it open-ended. A week later the mentor got a call from the mentee and they have been meeting off and on ever since.

Preliminary feedback from mentees indicates that they value the relationships with their mentors.

- It provided an opportunity to talk and to bounce ideas off an experienced faculty member.
- It helped with developing research projects.
- It provided networking opportunities across departments, which helped in finding graduate research assistants.

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