



# Interpreting and using student ratings data: Guidance for faculty serving as administrators and on evaluation committees



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## ABSTRACT

This article is about the accurate interpretation of student ratings data and the appropriate use of that data to evaluate faculty. Its aim is to make recommendations for use and interpretation based on more than 80 years of student ratings research. As more colleges and universities use student ratings data to guide personnel decisions, it is critical that administrators and faculty evaluators have access to research-based information about their use and interpretation.

The article begins with an overview of common views and misconceptions about student ratings, followed by clarification of what student ratings are and are not. Next are two sections that provide advice for two audiences—administrators and faculty evaluators—to help them accurately, responsibly, and appropriately use and interpret student ratings data. A list of administrator questions is followed by a list of advice for faculty responsible for evaluating other faculty members' records.

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## 1. The problem: misinterpretation and misuse of student ratings data

*Steadily accumulating evidence of the misuse or overuse of ratings data . . . and the perennial debate in the press concerning the validity of student ratings . . . do not invalidate the potential of ratings data as useful information about teaching performance. (Theall & Franklin, 2000, p. 95)*

Student ratings instruments have been around since the 1920s (Marsh, 1987; Remmers, 1933; Remmers & Brandenburg, 1927). I use the term student ratings to refer to surveys administered by colleges and universities directly to enrolled students under controlled circumstances, typically near the end of an academic term. These surveys are also referred to as student evaluations of teaching (SETs), student ratings of instruction (SRIs), teaching evaluations, and course evaluations.

When student ratings are used in personnel decisions, it is critical that they be used appropriately, and in ways consistent with the recommendations of experts in student ratings research (McKeachie, 1997; Theall & Franklin, 2001). Student ratings are nearly ubiquitous in U.S. higher education and the practice has become more common in other countries in the past few decades (Berk, 2005; Miller & Seldin, 2014; Seldin, 1999). In addition to serving as a source of feedback for instructional improvement, at

most institutions student ratings are also used in personnel decisions such as annual reviews, merit raises, tenure and promotion, post-tenure review, and for hiring and re-appointment of “tenure exempt” faculty.<sup>1</sup> The challenge of appropriate use of student ratings data will be with us as long as we continue to use them.

The purpose of this article is to make recommendations about some of the most common misuses of student ratings data in the faculty evaluation process, in a format that can be easily shared. But first, I briefly justify the need for this article by reviewing the common misconceptions of student ratings and faculty concerns about student ratings as represented in the academic press. Next, I suggest that the vast body of research literature on student ratings generally refutes the misconceptions, but that this literature is not widely known or accessed by faculty and administrators. The paper ends with two sections of concise and candid guidance for two groups based on the challenges they face in using student ratings for evaluation: 1) administrators who must be able to accurately answer faculty questions about how their student ratings will be used and interpreted; and 2) faculty responsible for evaluating other faculty members' dossiers. These guides fill an important gap

<sup>1</sup> I prefer to use a positive term, “tenure exempt,” to describe a class of faculty that has long been the majority in most U.S. colleges and universities, rather than the more typical terms “non-tenure-line” and “adjunct” faculty. The latter terms marginalize these faculty because they describe what they are *not*, emphasize difference, and highlight a lack of status.

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in the faculty evaluation literature created by a lack of formal training in use and interpretation of student ratings data, which leaves faculty and administrators to gather information based on their own experiences and the easily accessible academic press.

This article does not provide yet another research study or more empirical evidence that student ratings instruments are effective for gathering student feedback. Neither is this article intended to dispel myths about student ratings, nor provide a comprehensive overview of the vast student ratings research literature. Numerous other authors provide reviews and summaries of the research literature (Benton & Cashin, 2011; Benton & Li, 2015; Berk, 2005, 2013; Cashin, 1999, 2003). Readers interested in how to create a valid and reliable faculty evaluation system should consult Arreola (2007), Berk (2006), Braskamp, Brandenburg, & Ory (1984), Cashin (1996) and Hativa (2013a). To develop an in-depth understanding of the history and leaders of student ratings research, readers are directed to the works of Feldman (1976, 1989, 1992, 1993, 2007), Franklin and Theall (Franklin, 2001; Franklin & Theall, 1991, 1994; Theall & Franklin, 1990, 2000, 2001), Hativa (2013b), Marsh (1980, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1987, 2007; Marsh & Dunkin, 1992; Marsh & Roche, 1997), McKeachie (1979, 1990, 1997) and Ory (2001; Ory & Ryan, 2001; Ory, Braskamp, & Pieper, 1980).

## 2. Common views about student ratings

This article was, in part, prompted by the misinformation about student ratings that is easily accessible on the web and which is widely shared among faculty (Barre, 2015). Every few years, clusters of stories appear in the academic press that claim to have found fatal flaws in student ratings of teaching (e.g., Berrett, 2015a; Burt, 2015; Flaherty, 2016a). These stories are occasionally picked up by other news organizations (e.g., Barlow, 2015; Harvard Business Review, 2014; National Public Radio, 2015; Schuman, 2014). These stories raise fear among faculty members that they are, or will be, subject to unfair use of student ratings. Sensational headlines merge with a steady stream of stories that ensure anxieties about student ratings persist among the faculty.

Since 2007, the two academic news organizations most widely read by faculty in the U.S., *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education*, have published more than 50 stories about (or implicating) student ratings. Of these, almost 65% percent are negative, while only about 10% include both positive and negative comments about student ratings. Many of these stories are opinion pieces or essays that do not cite research to support their claims (e.g., Basu, 2011; Edwards, 2012; Epstein, 2010; Eubanks, 2011; Fant, 2010; Haynie, 2010; Inchausti, 2014; Jafar, 2012; Moriarty, 2009; Warner, 2012a, 2012b). Others report on studies that have not been peer reviewed or published (e.g., Berrett, 2015b; Fischman, 2010; Glenn, 2007, 2010; Pettit, 2016; Zaino, 2015) or that are of limited applicability because they examine student ratings in a single discipline or from a narrow (and not necessarily representative) segment of the student population (Breslow, 2007; Glenn, 2011; Hamermesh, 2011; Heggen, 2008; Powers, 2007). Less than 25% of the studies are positive or include useful advice (e.g., Aragon, 2013; Dean Dad, 2007, 2010; Miller, 2010; Perlmutter, 2011; Sprague, 2016; Warner, 2012a, 2012b; Weir, 2010). Almost none of the 50 stories note that the issues raised were identified and examined long ago by student ratings researchers.

The most sensational headlines suggest that student ratings have finally been recognized as hopelessly flawed and/or predict their imminent demise (see above citations), but they do reflect the concerns of faculty, including that:

- Student ratings are the sole measure of teaching
- Other faculty manipulate students to achieve higher ratings

- Students are biased against certain faculty members (and no one will notice)
- Ratings do not reflect use of effective teaching methods
- Correlations with other variables make the ratings invalid or unreliable
- Online response rates are too low to be representative
- Students do not take the ratings seriously, lie, or are overly critical
- Evaluators focus on rare or negative ratings and do not know what normal variation is acceptable

Based on the regular appearance of articles questioning the value and use of student ratings and suggesting that they are universally reviled by faculty (e.g., Bernhard, 2015; Patton, 2015), two conclusions can be drawn. First, concerns important to the faculty about the use of student ratings have not been sufficiently addressed. Second, what we know about student ratings from the research literature is not reaching faculty or administrators. Faculty and administrators are largely unaware of the vast research literature, even though it is the most researched topic in higher education (Berk, 2013; Seldin, 1999) and the research literature has accumulated for more than 80 years (Cashin, 1999; Ory, 2001; Theall & Franklin, 1990, 2001).

## 3. What student ratings are and are not

*The students' satisfaction with, or perception of, learning is related to the evaluations they give. (Clayson, 2009, p. 26)*

Before advancing to the primary sections of this article, Questions Asked by Administrators and Guidelines for Faculty, it is important to clarify what student ratings are and are not.

*Student ratings are student perception data.*

Student ratings instruments are used to gather the collective views of a group of students about their experience in a course taught by a particular faculty member<sup>2</sup> (Abrami, 2001; Arreola, 2007; Hativa, 2013a). Data are typically collected systematically from enrolled students who have experienced the learning environment created by the faculty member. Most student ratings instruments include a series of items with rating scales that ask about students' perceptions in terms of quality, agreement, importance, frequency, or likelihood. The scales are typically linear, ordinal, and divided into five to seven categories. Some instruments use numerical rating scales anchored at each end with "highest rating" and "lowest rating."

*Student ratings are not faculty evaluations.*

Student ratings researchers are clear to differentiate between the producers of the data (students) and the users of the data (faculty and administrators) for both improvement and evaluative purposes. That many faculty view student ratings as evaluations likely stems from the names colleges and universities assign to their ratings instruments, e.g., Student Evaluations of Teaching, Course Evaluations).

*Student Ratings Are Not Measures of Student Learning.*

Student ratings have never been intended to serve as a proxy for learning. Confusion over this may result from student ratings

<sup>2</sup> Student ratings administered by a college or university are not the same as publicly available ratings websites, such as ratemyprofessors.com. Such sites are open to anyone, not solely to enrolled students, and they rely entirely on students motivated to visit the site.

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