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Student evaluation based indicators of teaching excellence from a highly selective liberal arts college[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The paper uses individual level data from each student that has enrolled in each class in the department in the last five years. Unlike several past studies that lack data on teaching quality measures Ordered Probit models reveal that the significant determinants of effective teaching, based on student evaluations of teaching (SET) are: organization, clarity of exposition, availability and enthusiasm of the instructor. The gender and race of the instructor is significant with female and non-white instructors being downgraded by students. The usual findings of expected grades inflating teaching evaluations are contested by the empirical evidence from this paper.

Highly selective liberal arts colleges claim to provide a better education based on smaller class sizes and excellent teachers that are also active scholars. The purpose of this paper is to examine the determinants of effective teaching in Economics and Business, according to student evaluations of teaching (SET) at one such college. The paper will begin with a literature review of the scholarship on teaching evaluations. The next section will describe the dataset and the models used to examine teaching effectiveness. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the econometric results.

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1. Literature review

There is a substantial literature on student evaluations of teaching (SET) but a search for the determinants of teaching excellence at liberal arts colleges reveals a sparsely populated area of this pedagogical literature. A perusal of the literature reveals several prominent themes. One dominant strand of the literature deals with the impact of grade inflation on SET. Another strand discusses the impact of non-teaching related factors such as faculty scholarship, socio-demographic factors of students/faculty such as gender and race on SET. The attributes of effective teachers have also been well documented. Yet another branch of the literature focuses on the drawbacks of student teaching evaluations and questions their validity as a tool to measure teaching quality.

This paper examines what attributes student's value in an Economics and Business Professor at a highly selective liberal arts college. At colleges such as these while scholarship is essential, it is non-substitutable for teaching ability when it comes to tenure and promotion decisions. There is a growing trend for college administrators to use SET to evaluate a teacher's prowess. While several schools also use other tools to evaluate teaching effectiveness such as peer observations of teaching, SET are almost always the only tool used for annual reviews and annual salary raises. This paper adds to the literature by sorting out signal from noise and quantifying some of the demographic and grade inflation biases that exist in such data. The policy relevance of this piece is that not all SET quantifications of numbers are equal. Some instructors do get downgraded because of demographic differences while others do get downgraded due to actual deficiencies in teaching. This piece is the first of its kind to quantify these factors using average marginal effects from an Ordered Probit Model. The results are similar to the existing literature in that race, gender and grade inflation biases do exist. However, in contrast to existing studies student's expected grades do not boost their evaluation of an instructor across the board. It is only if a student expects to get an A that they boost their evaluation of the instructor and the course. If administrators or review committees fail to account for these biases they would be making decisions about teaching quality that reflect the biases of the students.

The survey of the literature presented below will attempt to identify salient features that impact student teaching evaluations and factors that must be controlled for in order to use student teaching evaluations as reliable instruments to gauge the quality of teaching.

2. Grade inflation and SET

Expected grades are a significant determinant of the SET that instructors receive. Jewell and McPherson find that faculty may buy better evaluations by inflating students grade expectations (McPherson and Jewell, 2007). They use feasible generalized least squares (FGLS) on the data collected from students in their masters program in Economics. Their SET scores used in the regression consist of the average of student responses on a one to five scale. They find that a 1 unit increase in expected grade corresponds to a 0.25 unit increase in the instructors SET score. They also find that White instructors get 0.08 points higher on their SET scores than non-white instructors, while gender is insignificant. The current study also finds these effects but unlike Jewell and McPherson expected grade only boost course and instructor evaluations if the students expects to get an A.

Jewell, McPherson and Tieslau using data from 1683 courses taught at 28 different academic departments argue that incentives to inflate grades vary according to the characteristics of departments and instructors (Jewell et al., 2011). In another recent study Jewell and McPherson suggest that female professors are most likely to inflate grades at large public universities while ethnicity plays a smaller role in grade inflation. Departments that see more talented students as measured by average SAT scores see grade inflation at a slower rate than those with less talented students (Jewell and McPherson, 2012). Not all scholars agree. Boertz claims that student evaluations do not cause grade inflation because of instructor's attempting to bribe students with higher grades in return for better teaching evaluations (Boertz, 2004). McPherson, Jewell and Kim find that instructors can buy better evaluation scores by inflating students grade expectations

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