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Alternative Scale Study The IDEA Center

Since 1969, when the initial version of the IDEA student rating form was created, students have been asked to rate their progress on objectives chosen by their instructor. This measure of “student learning” has been repeatedly validated; it is an important cornerstone in the rationale of the IDEA system. But some users have objected to the scale used to collect student ratings, which ranges from “1=Low (lowest 10 percent of classes I have taken here)” to “3=Average (middle 40 percent of classes I have taken here)” to “5=High (highest 10 percent of classes I have taken here).” Although this scale seems especially problematical for first time enrollees, there is also reason to doubt that the typical student follows the instructions (i.e., seriously reflects on her/his entire educational experience at the institution before making these ratings).

The IDEA Center believes that the questions raised about this scale are legitimate and has aspired for some time to substitute a meaningful alternative. We have not done so because this might make dubious the ability to compare or combine IDEA results over several years; activities that add value to participation in the program. Of course, if a substitute scale yielded results comparable to those for the original, this objection would be rendered moot.

In the spring term of 2003, the Center initiated a study to compare results of the original rating scale with a substitute designed to address objections to the original scale. The substitute version used the following alternative responses: 1=No apparent progress; 2=Slight progress—I made small gains on this objective; 3=Moderate progress—I made some gains on

this objective; 4=Substantial progress—I made large gains on this objective; 5=Exceptional progress—I made outstanding gains on this objective.

For this study, two versions of the IDEA student rating form were printed; they were identical except for the scale used to rate progress. Twelve institutions cooperated in the study by administering the two versions to random halves of 110 “large” classes (classes enrolling at least 35 students); typically, every other student made ratings using the substitute scale. Since 12 objectives were rated, a total of 1320 t-test comparisons were made between the averages for the two versions (110 x 12).

The 5% level of probability was used to determine if the difference between the two averages was greater than would be expected by “chance.” By choosing this level, we acknowledge that about 5% of the tests would erroneously conclude that a “real” difference existed. Only 5.3% of the 1320 differences were “significant,” a figure very close to what would be expected if there were no real differences. Furthermore, the overall averages for the two versions were nearly identical for all 12 objectives; statistically significant differences were found on two objectives (“Team skills” and “Interest in learning more”); but these differences (less than 0.1 on the 5-point scales) were too slight to be of practical significance.

It was concluded that the new rating scale could be substituted for the original without compromising year-to-year comparability. Future printings of IDEA forms will use the substitute rating scale.