



University Administrators Find Student Ratings of Instruction Useful

Beran, T., Violato, C., & Kline, D. (2007). What's the "use" of student ratings of instruction for administrators? One university's experience. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 37, 27-43.

Student ratings of instruction (SRI) provide helpful information to university instructors about how to improve teaching, to students about course selection, and to course developers about instructional strategies. However, relatively less is known about the utility value of SRI to administrators. The purpose of the current study was to investigate how administrators within a single major Canadian university use SRI. The authors developed and administered a survey to specifically ask department heads and deans how student ratings are used, what information is most useful, what additional information beyond the ratings is needed, and their views about SRI.

Surveys were sent to all administrators in the institution which was comprised of 20,000 undergraduate and 5,000 graduate students, as well as 1,800 full and part-time faculty. Closed-ended items, using 4-point scales, queried administrators about usefulness of student ratings for individual and unit-level decision making. Open-ended questions asked opinions about SRI, how they are used, and additional information needed beyond student ratings.

A total of 52 administrators responded for a 53% response rate. Principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation revealed four factors regarding reasons for using ratings: to evaluate *teaching quality*, to assess *progress in teaching*, to *evaluate and promote instructors*, and to develop *teaching schedules*. All factors had at least moderate to high reliability. Mean scores on individual items showed most administrators use ratings for evaluating the quality of teaching, rewarding excellence in teaching, and determining merit, but few use them for scheduling courses.

A second PCA regarding the utility of ratings revealed two factors with high reliability: information about *teaching procedures* (e.g., instructor follows an outline) and *instructor characteristics* (e.g., overall quality of instruction). Administrators found most helpful information about overall instructional quality and respect shown to students. They found least helpful information about the instructor's ability to follow a course outline.

Content analysis of open-ended responses revealed that student ratings serve several functions, including identifying the quality of teaching for an individual faculty member and the overall effectiveness of a unit. Administrators reported that they found information about students' overall impressions of course instruction more helpful than ratings on individual items. A minority of administrators were concerned about validity of student ratings, their potential for misuse, their effects on grading standards, and the overemphasis on making instructors responsible for influencing student learning.

On the whole, the study revealed that administrators use SRI from a moderate to a high extent to evaluate individual teaching, monitor progress, and evaluate teaching at the unit level. They found student ratings very helpful in decisions about merit pay, promotion, and tenure, as well as judging the quality of teaching. They also used ratings to monitor changes in teaching across time, making nominations for teaching awards, and remediating poor teaching. Finally, ratings were useful in gauging and promoting the effectiveness of teaching within individual academic units.