



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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What Role Should Students Play in Evaluating Their Teachers?

How should student course evaluations be used to evaluate faculty? What are students capable and incapable of evaluating? Do administrators use student evaluations fairly in personnel decisions? What do students themselves think of course evaluations? Can student evaluations be used in a way that will improve teaching and learning at Western? These are questions we should probably be asking ourselves.

A few years ago, General Administration asked Chancellor Bardo about WCU's process of evaluating teaching, specifically whether it was uniform across all departments. In response, the Faculty Senate Council on Instruction and Curriculum charged the Instruction Committee to study our teaching evaluation process, recognizing that faculty should have a strong voice in creating a process that will affect student learning and faculty careers at WCU.

Those on this committee realized that our formidable task, in a nutshell, was to recommend a uniform teaching evaluation process, including a student course evaluation instrument, that would accomplish two separate but equally important goals:

- 1) To help instructors improve their performance in the classroom
- 2) To ensure that faculty receive fair pay, tenure, and promotion based in part on classroom performance

Some faculty believe that effective teaching can't be measured, that no one can define the characteristics of effective teaching. Thus, our first task was to read the scholarly research. We discovered that more than 15,000 studies have been published on some aspect of teaching effectiveness. Peter Seldin, a nationally recognized authority on the teaching evaluation process, lists some of these characteristics in his book, *Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching*. He concludes that "from this body of research arise reasonably consistent findings on what constitutes effective teaching." More specifically, our committee found that while student ratings are a key component of the teaching evaluation process, research shows that student course evaluations should not be used as the single instrument to measure teaching effectiveness. Based on the research, student ratings can be useful to improve teaching (formative evaluation) and to make personnel decisions (summative evaluation) when they are part of a broader assessment process.

However, at most colleges and universities, student ratings are being used almost exclusively to measure faculty performance. Based on a survey of over 40,000 department chairs, William E.

Cashin concludes that “many college and universities rely heavily, if not solely, on student rating data as the only systematic source of data collected to evaluate teaching.” Cashin suggests that successful evaluation of teaching involves several areas—such as mastery of subject matter, curriculum development, course design, and administrative requirements—that most students cannot judge with confidence.

All the studies we found conclude that universities should use several different sources in the evaluation process. For example, many studies suggest that self-assessment is an invaluable tool for evaluation. If teaching is a process, can the instructor assess his or her own performance and find areas of strength and weakness? Other sources might be evaluation by other colleagues and review of syllabi and exams. Peter Seldin advocates the use of a teaching portfolio, similar to the one compiled to compete for a teaching award, in which numerous class materials, student ratings, classroom visits by outside evaluators, and other documents might be gathered. Seldin believes that a variety of materials provides a more accurate view of what goes on in the classroom. On the other hand, he emphasizes that professors must provide evidence that they are accomplishing what they set out to do. He writes, “if they say they have helped students write better, then they should include samples of student writing in the teaching portfolio. If they say students are scoring better on tests, include the scores.” He further explains that “there are some folks who just think it’s inappropriate to try to measure teaching. But my notion of measuring teaching is whether someone is reasonably effective, not whether they are a 4.8 on a 5.0 scale.” Seldin’s comments reflect a changing perception that teaching evaluation should focus on student learning rather than faculty performance.

Our committee asks that you participate in a dialogue this spring about teaching evaluation on the campus of Western Carolina University. After hearing from faculty, we will present our recommendations to the Faculty Senate, including our recommendations for a standard student ratings instrument. Make your voice heard. Please mark **Tuesday, February 3**, on your calendar: from 2 to 5 pm, **Peter Seldin**, Distinguished Professor of Management at Pace University and expert on the evaluation of teaching, will conduct a workshop in the Hospitality Room at the Ramsey Center on “**Assessing Faculty Teaching Performance**.” In addition, you will have the opportunity to discuss these issues further at two open forums scheduled for **Thursday, February 12**, and **Wednesday, February 18**, both 2:00 to 3:00 pm in UC 232A.

These upcoming events provide the opportunity for you to be informed and then to make your voice heard. The recommendations made by the committee will affect your teaching and your career at Western Carolina University. We are speaking on your behalf, so please let us hear your voice. Members of the committee are Gayle Miller, Mae Miller Claxton, Brian Gastle, Dale Carpenter, Walter Foegelle, Hollye Moss, Betty White, and Will Peebles. Currently, we meet on Tuesdays at 3:30 PM in Coulter 419. Please visit our website for more information at <http://paws.wcu.edu/bgastle/teacheval/index.html> and send your responses to Terry Nienhuis in the Faculty Center to be printed in the next issue of notes & quotes.

Mae Miller Claxton, English

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