

Classroom Experiences 1999

Summary

Outcome

The faculty at the University will provide students with satisfactory in-class experiences that promote learning.

Faculty and Personnel Involved

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Methods and Procedures

1. Student comments
2. Quantitative course evaluations

Results

1. About two-thirds of the student comments were positive and one-third negative.
2. The proportion of positive and negative comments in courses taught by full-timers and part-timers were very similar.
3. Positive comments referred to caring faculty, enjoyment of the classes, appropriateness of and interest in the subject matter, and appreciation of learning specific skills.
4. Negative comments referred to issues of communication, course organization, enthusiasm, and resources.
5. Over 80% of students showed strong approval of in-class experiences at the lower and upper division levels. However, upper division courses tended to be experienced a little more positively.

Actions for Program Improvement

1. The Assessment Committee formed a subcommittee to examine the current course evaluation form and propose modifications to reflect outcome as well as process issues.
2. Analysis of student comments in disciplinary units will be conducted.

Classroom Experiences

Outcome

The faculty at the University will provide students with satisfactory in-class experiences that promote learning.

Faculty and Personnel Involved

1. Faculty who administered the course evaluation forms.
2. Staff in the Office of Institutional Research who conducted the quantitative analysis of course evaluations.
3. Ann Wichman and Dorena Wright conducted the content analysis of student comments.
4. Mark Mitchell, a Political Science senior, helped with the statistical analysis of student comments.

Methods and Procedures

1. Student Comments

A random sample of 438 student-comment forms was identified. These came from undergraduate courses taught in the spring of 1998 in the College of Arts and Sciences on the main campus. The sample was obtained by randomly selecting two comment sheets from each of the courses taught during the semester. The only condition for selection was that there would be comments in response to all three of the open-ended questions: "Most satisfied," "Least satisfied," and "Suggested improvements".

2. Quantitative Course Evaluations

The course evaluations given at the end of each class have five questions to which students respond on a 6-point Likert scale. This form was developed internally and has been in use for over 10 years (see attached). The questions deal with course organization, appropriateness of content, productivity of class sessions, amount of learning, and overall effectiveness of instructors. The quantitative portion of student evaluations from the spring, 1998 semester were not available for statistical analysis. Consequently, student responses to the quantitative form from the Spring 1999 undergraduate classes on the main campus were analyzed by the Office of Institutional Research. The analysis was done separately for the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Business and Global studies. Only the data for the Arts and Sciences are presented here. Altogether, 229 Arts and Sciences courses were used in the analysis. The unit of analysis was the individual student, and the total number of cases was 3673.

Results

1. Student Comments

The categories of themes were broken down into negative and positive comments and whether they dealt with instructor characteristics, course characteristics or other general issues. The entire list of themes is attached.

The attached tables 1 through 8 summarize the percentage of different thematic categories comparing courses taught by part-time and full-time faculty. As Table 1 shows, of the 1144 comments overall one-third were negative and two-thirds were positive. The proportion of positive and negative comments was almost identical for part-time and full-time faculty. This pattern was quite consistent across the other subcategories.

Considering the total number of positive and negative comments, the following appeared at least 5% of the time:

General positive (good course, enjoyed)	14%
Appropriate helpful assignments	9%
Interesting subject matter	6%
Caring, nurturing instructor	5%
Good communication skills	5%
Learned specific skill	5%

Positive Themes

The most common positive personal characteristic of the instructors were “caring” and “good communications.” The course characteristics that were considered most positive were “appropriate and helpful assignment” and “interesting subject matter.” As Table 4 shows, 19% of the themes refer to class and student involvement in the general process category of themes. However, of the 780 total positive characteristics only 5.5% (43 comments) referred to “good class and student involvement.”

In the area of themes related to learning outcomes (Table 5) 56% relate to learning specific skills and 44% to learning content and information. While the percentage breakdown was about even for full-time and part-time faculty, the breakdown was two-to-one in favor of learning specific skills.

Negative Themes

Tables 6, 7 and 8 refer to negative themes. Compared to the grand total of themes, 8% were related to negative personal teacher characteristics, and 19% to negative course characteristics.

In the area of personal characteristics, overall “poor communications” was the most frequent theme followed by “lack of knowledge and/or preparation”, “uncaring, critical, biased” and “lack of enthusiasm.” For part-time faculty, relatively higher proportion of negative themes were “lack of enthusiasm” or “uncaring, critical, biased.” For full-time

faculty, relatively higher proportion of negative themes was “poor communication” or “lack of knowledge/preparation.”

In the area of negative course characteristics, overall most frequent themes were “overly rigorous load and harsh grading” and “poor organization.” More of the part-time faculty themes dealt with “poor organization,” and more of the full-time faculty themes dealt with “poor resources.” Only about 2% of the grand total of themes indicated limited nature of the class content and presentations by faculty, and desire for more depth and additional work.

2. Quantitative Course Evaluations

The following table presents the mean ratings of 3673 students on the five questions on a 6-point Likert scale, with 1 being strongly agree.

Table

Means and standard deviations of student ratings of questions on course evaluations for lower (n=1519) and upper (n=2154) division courses.

Questions	Lower		Upper	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
1. This course has been planned and clearly organized.	1.66	1.00	1.51	.81
2. The contents of texts, handouts, films, lectures, and/or discussions have been appropriate to the course objectives.	1.62	.93	1.47	.79
3. The class sessions have been productive in this course.	1.80	1.12	1.60	.93
4. I learned a great deal in this course	1.88	1.19	1.60	.97
5. Overall, this instructor has been effective.	1.76	1.13	1.53	.92

The mean ratings show a positive experience overall, for both upper and lower division courses. However, the in-class experiences of upper division courses appear to be slightly, but significantly (p 's < .01), more positive in all five areas. Further inspection of frequency distributions (See Attached) show that over 80% of the students agree or strongly agree with the statements on the evaluation form at the upper as well as the lower division levels.

Dissemination and Dialogue

The results of the content analysis of student comments were shared with the general faculty and the Assessment Committee. The analysis of the quantitative data had not been

disseminated at the writing of this report. Issues related to course evaluations in terms of methodology and purpose will be taken to the Faculty Senate and Faculty Personnel Committee in the Fall of 1999.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The quantitative analysis showed that the overall in-class experiences were positive and effective. However, one needs to raise the question of whether the over 80% approval of in-class experiences may be due to the inability of the instrument to differentiate student opinions. The analysis of student comments indicated strong positive experiences, but also pointed to some negative elements. As many as one-third of the comments need attention, such as communication, organization, enthusiasm and resources.

In terms of strengths, about two-thirds of the comments were positive in nature. These pointed to caring faculty, enjoyment of the classes, appropriateness of and interest in the subject matter, and appreciation of learning specific skills.

The reported in-class experiences of students in courses taught by part-time and full-time faculty appear to be quite comparable. Lower as well as upper division courses are experienced quite positively, but upper division courses tend to be experienced a little more positively, as shown by the quantitative measures of the course evaluation.

The following recommendations may be considered for future action:

1. Explore the possibility of revising the course evaluation form to be sensitive to differential experiences of students, and address perceptions of learning outcomes more specifically in addition to process issues.
2. Analyze student comments by program, department, or disciplinary areas.
3. Do aggregate analysis of course evaluations at off-campus sites in the Arts and Sciences, as well as other Colleges and Schools.
4. Plan part-time and full-time faculty discussion groups to address issues that need attention.

Actions for Program Improvements

The Assessment Committee has formed a subcommittee to examine the current course evaluation form and propose modifications to reflect learning outcomes, as well as sensitivity to differential experiences. This committee has already met several times and begun its research of course evaluation forms from other institutions.

The analysis of student comments in disciplinary units is in process. When completed the results will be shared and discussed by faculty in corresponding units.