

## Interpreting and Using Student Evaluations

### Assumptions:

- You are asking the right questions at the right time, in the right way (updated VUSN evals!)
- Students are the most qualified source to provide information on their learning experience.
- You are interested in what the students have to say and want to use them to improve teaching and learning.

### Process:

1. Read them. Reflect on evaluations in relation to course/individual teaching goals.
  - Don't take it personally, even if it is personal. You can't please all of the people all of the time. Interpret negative comments with caution. If there are forced choice questions and the responses are negative then they may reflect a concern with teaching.
  - Students who write positive comments generally mean them.
  - Is evaluation data consistent with the informal feedback you receive from students (i.e. is there a mismatch between positive informal student comments and poor evals?)?
  - What about your teaching seems to be effective? What can be improved?
  - Check the sample size, mean and standard deviation. How many students completed evaluations? What is your average rating for each question and overall? Remember, if there is a large standard deviation on a given question, there is student disagreement. With a small SD, there is consensus.
  
2. Organize comments into themes using key words to determine important areas of consensus.
  - Group comments by teaching components (organization, communication, interaction, feedback, etc.), or use components that fit the evaluation form, your course, or individual goals.
  - Look at comments in relation to the numeric data. In areas of lower ratings, are there corresponding comments that address specific issues? Linking the two allows you to identify specific changes that could enhance teaching effectiveness.
  - Inconsistencies in student comments (one group loves an activity that others find a waste of time) may reflect differences in student learning preferences and educational experiences. Inconsistent comments are more prevalent in large courses, with diverse students. Some students who are more comfortable with a teacher-centered approach may be uncomfortable with a challenging inquiry based approach.

Example table using topic areas from VUSN faculty evaluations:

Avg. Question Rating →		3.98	1.76	
Q1 Facilitate learning	(place selected topically corresponding written comments in the boxes)			
Q2 Expertise				
Q3 Evaluation			- minimal to no feedback given on assignments	
Q4 Supportive		+ makes me want to learn, enthusiastic and makes sure we understand concepts		

- The VUSN evals also contain questions for narrative responses related to valuable aspects of the course, suggestions for improvement, and effective teaching methods that may be built into a table for interpretation.

3. Identify strengths, ideas for change, and issues beyond your control.

- Evaluate yourself! Does your assessment of your teaching match that of your students?
- Are there simple changes that can be made or are there more substantial issues to tackle?
- Draw your conclusions. For example, if the people who rate your course highly have a problem with how the material is presented in class, then you can work on that.

4. Respond.

- Addressing student concerns is about being transparent and should take place after interpretation and reflection.
- If you teach a series of similar courses with the same students or are completing mid term evaluations, thank students for participation in completing the evaluations and consider presenting the results. Choose 3 things and balance the positive and negative. When you plan to make changes, tell them what you will do and why. If you do not plan to make changes, explain why a change is not possible. Do not be apologetic, angry, or defensive. Your goal is to let students know you value their input and are being responsive.
- If you have number of negative comments, you may want to speak confidentially with someone to keep perspective, restore confidence, and explore ways to address issues for the future.

Example responses to feedback:

Item	Suggestions for Response
Q1 Facilitate learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Signal shifts in topics and explain connections between various topics, don't assume students will intuitively understand critical links</li><li>• Consider student background and try to anticipate common confusion</li><li>• Explain key points in more than one way</li><li>• Check for understanding using think/pair share/clickers, make time for student questions</li></ul>
Q2 Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Practice talking through difficult concepts with someone unfamiliar to the field and note their questions</li><li>• Use your own professional experience to explain/discuss topics</li></ul>
Q3 Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Set high but achievable standards for student performance</li><li>• Clearly explain evaluation procedures and grading guidelines, be explicit about important points students need to remember (make sure you gave them enough opportunity for interaction with the material for them to know it!), and give advice about how to prepare for your evaluation</li><li>• Provide clear direct feedback on how they can improve (relate to the student work, not their ability - NO: you don't seem to understand this concept. YES: Your summary reflects some confusion about the main patient care concern.)</li><li>• Be consistent</li></ul>
Q4 Supportive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demonstrate your enthusiasm for the subject and tell them why you love it</li><li>• Explain how your content relates to their future professional goals</li><li>• Balance negative comments with genuine positive feedback, recognize achievements, avoid correcting students in ways that embarrass them</li><li>• Help them review, engage them in interaction, listen carefully</li><li>• Describe yourself as being a part of a community of scholars rather than an authority figure</li></ul>

\* Don't forget to document your reflections on course evaluations in the course portfolio if you are a course coordinator. Remember to address reflections on faculty evaluations in your personal teaching goals on your work plan.

Resources:

1. Confidential consultation with VUSN Director of Faculty Development (B. Kennedy), your area director, or Cynthia Brame at the Center For Teaching for interpretation and suggestions for responding to student feedback.
2. CFT - <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/reflecting/student-evaluations/> (contains references)