

## How Do Faculty Interpret their Student Course Feedback?

Soliciting feedback from our students to ask for their perceptions of a course is a longstanding practice in academia and provides one useful piece of data that should be added to other components (such as peer observation or self-reflection) for teaching evaluation. Although students are not trained to evaluate teaching and are not pedagogy experts, their feedback about their experiences may be a useful source of information and can be used to help make informed decisions about changes to improve student learning. Again, it is important to remember that student course feedback does not measure how much students learned; rather, it focuses on their perception of their learning experience.

### Before Reading Your Student Feedback

**Reflect:** Consider keeping a teaching journal where you reflect on the highs and lows of your courses. Capturing your own thoughts and thinking about your own teaching practices can help you to take in the results of your course evaluations.

**Be intentional:** Give yourself undistracted time to read their feedback. Take a minute to think about how the class went from your perspective. What do you think went well? What challenges are you already aware of?

**Read and react:** Look at the feedback. If you have an emotional reaction, that's ok! Teaching is vulnerable and it can be painful to hear criticism. Take a break if needed.

**Revisit:** After your first reading, consider coming back to your student feedback to analyze it with more time.

**Respond:** What actions will you take (if any)?

### Interpreting Qualitative Data

Eight questions on the Student Course Feedback tool are evaluated with a Likert scale. This is a widely used approach to scaling responses in survey research. For an accurate interpretation, be sure to keep the scale in mind while reading through your feedback. The scale is as follows:

### EXAMPLE OF A FIVE-POINT LIKERT SCALE

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

In general, high scores (4+) can be interpreted as a student consensus indicating a strength. At the other end of the scale, low scores (2-) should be considered as an area that requires your attention and possible development. Small differences in mean (average) ratings are common and not necessarily meaningful.

You should typically look at your student feedback numbers in the aggregate. Consider the following questions:

- Which scores align with my general sense of student experiences in this course?
- Which scores are surprising (higher or lower than expected)? Look for patterns: are the distributions consistent and in the ranges you expect? Are there unusual clusters, such as a “spike,” or a very high and very low grouping?
- What factors likely contributed to these surprises? Remember that a single mean score can be a few decimal points higher or lower simply due to the random sample of students in a particular course from term to term. An increase or decrease of a few decimal points should not necessarily be interpreted as a significant change.
- How do these numbers compare with courses I have taught in the past?

#### **Important point to remember:**

The Student Feedback Forms are based on student perception, which implies that the validity increases proportionally with the number of occurrences. Contradictory written comments are not unusual. Any pedagogical changes that you choose to make should be based on the most representative results and less on outlying responses.

#### **Interpreting Quantitative Data**

When looking at your student course feedback, most faculty are very interested in student comments. In creating the revised questions for the Student Course Feedback Form, analyses from pilot test 1 (Spring, 2023) and pilot test 2 ((Fall, 2023) showed that students wrote about twice as many words (in total) with the addition of two free-response questions. Now, what do you do with these data?

Your goal should be to identify useful information and patterns. You want to pay attention to frequency of words, trends or disagreements among student comments, and suggestions for possible changes. One systematic way to do this is to sort your comments into categories:

Type of Comment	Your Response
Unrelated to teaching and learning	Discard these comments, as they do not contribute to your assessment efforts.
Problematic	<p>Consider sharing these comments with a trusted colleague or mentor to help you process them. Comments that demonstrate explicit or implicit biases can be quite upsetting.</p> <p>The literature about student evaluation data consistently shows biases related to gender, race, and other identity markers. In our Fall 2023 pilot study, linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) analysis of free-response data showed that there were fewer gendered words with the new questions. We hope that this equates to some reduction in gender-based biases. We encourage administrators using the student course feedback data to familiarize themselves with the scholarship regarding student evaluation data. We have provided recommendations for administrators interpreting this data for continuing appointment, tenure, and promotion.</p> <p>If a threat is issued in your comments, please bring this to your chair/area coordinator/director's attention. Although student course feedback is a confidential process, in extreme cases, the SmartEvals administrator may be able to assist in examining the comment's origin.</p>
Positive	Enjoy! These comments tell you what (students think) is working in your class. Compare the themes with less positive comments. Look for areas of agreement and disagreement among students.
Actionable suggestion	These comments offer suggestions or shed light on pain points in the class that you can do something about. Look for themes, compare with positive comments and identify areas of agreement and disagreement among students. Consider the trade-offs associated with making each suggested change (e.g., your own bandwidth, alignment with your teaching philosophy and learning goals, and impact on overall student learning), as well as ways in which you can

	give students additional information to help them understand why things are set up the way they are.
Nonactionable suggestion	These comments offer suggestions or shed light on pain points in the class but are items you cannot address in the context of your course. Sort these comments into themes and consider passing them along to individuals who can make use of the information (e.g., chair, director, area coordinator, facilities management, lab coordinator).

Student feedback regarding teaching remains an important part of university culture. [OP 32.32](#) stipulates that “student evaluations of teaching abilities will be conducted at least once each academic year by each faculty member using a standard university form.” Faculty are encouraged to consider Student Course Feedback as a tool for improving teaching effectiveness.

If you would like to schedule a consultation to review your student course feedback, please reach out to the [TLPDC](#). If you are interested in having another faculty member partner with you in reading your course evaluations and perhaps even removing hurtful or biased comments, please consider contacting the [Teaching Academy](#) to set up a collaboration with a member who can serve in this role.

## Resources

Center for Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). *Interpreting and responding to student evaluations of teaching*. University of Georgia.

<https://ctl.uga.edu/resources/documents/interpreting-and-responding-to-student-evaluations-of-teaching.pdf>

Cornes, S., Torre, D., Fulton, T. B., Oza, S., Teherani, A., & Chen, H. C. (2023). When students' words hurt: 12 tips for helping faculty receive and respond constructively to student evaluations of teaching. *Medical education online*, 28(1), 2154768.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10872981.2022.2154768>.

Stanford Evaluation & Research. (n.d.). *Interpret feedback*. Stanford University.

<https://evals.stanford.edu/results/respond-feedback>