

Interpreting Student Course Feedback from an Administrator’s Perspective

When student feedback is used in decision-making for continuing appointment, tenure, or promotion, it is critical that administrators use this information appropriately. Student Course Feedback should not be the sole piece of data used in decision-making, particularly given the weight of these decisions. Single course evaluations are just one piece of a larger picture and should be viewed in context, not in isolation. The larger picture could include other data such as mid-term feedback from students, peer observations and evaluations, reviews of course materials, and self-evaluations including portfolios, reflection, or other artifacts.

A few disclaimers about what Student Course Feedback is and is not:

- Student feedback is not an evaluation of teaching. Rather, it is a collection of student perceptions of their experiences in a course taught by a particular faculty member. Note that at Texas Tech, we intentionally call this process, “Student Course Feedback” to emphasize its purpose.
- Student Course Feedback does not measure learning. Research consistently fails to find evidence of a significant correlation between measures of student learning and ratings of teaching quality and effectiveness.
- Student Course Feedback is an established practice at our institution, and we value our students’ input. [OP 32.32](#) states that “student evaluations of teaching ability” will be conducted at least once each academic year by each faculty member using a standard university form.” As a part of the [Teaching Evaluation Initiative](#), a two-year investigation into our Course and Instruction Evaluation recently examined and revised our university evaluation form. Significant changes were approved and will be implemented campus-wide in Fall 2025. To see the updated form and learn more about the process, visit our [Student Course Feedback page](#).

Common questions about Student Course Feedback:

How do I know if a faculty member’s ratings are good or bad?

Pay attention to the distribution of ratings across the scale. Remember that small differences in mean (average) ratings are common and not necessarily meaningful. Many institutions (including Texas Tech) have ratings that are distributed across a 3.5-5 on a 5-point scale. If a large percentage of the faculty member’s ratings are clustered at the upper end of the scale, this is a positive reflection even if there are some lower ratings. We all know that every faculty member receives lower ratings at some point in their career.

When faculty members have a distribution of scores below the midpoint of the scale, there may be a factor or instructional issue that influenced their scores.

TIP #1: Administrators should begin by seeking the faculty member's input and talking through these ratings. If a faculty member has many scores in the 1-2 range (on a 5-point scale), they may be experiencing some challenges, particularly if there is a consistent pattern of low scores over multiple semesters. Texas Tech has many professional development resources focused on teaching, and we highly recommend a consultation with the [TLPDC](#) to consider mentoring, coaching, and resources to support faculty success.

What do I tell a faculty member who says that Student Feedback Forms are just a popularity contest?

The purpose of the Student Feedback Form is to gather input from students. Although student evaluations of teaching have been researched more than other methods of teaching evaluation, their validity is often questioned, perhaps because of the weight given to these ratings.

TIP #2: To combat myths about their validity, administrators must take care to pair them with other evaluation data (such as self-reflections from faculty and peer evaluations).

Is Student Course Feedback biased?

In a word, yes! After all, students are humans. But are biases against a particular attribute strong enough to influence overall student ratings of the faculty member's teaching? While the impact of these biases is significant, it may not fully explain why a faculty member receives consistently low ratings clustered at the bottom of the rating scale.

Administrators should be aware of controversies in student evaluation data. Research consistently shows that student evaluation data is problematic: Women are rated lower than men, and faculty of color are rated lower than their white colleagues (Anderson & Smith, 2005; Bavishi, Madera, & Hebl, 2010; Reid, 2010; Smith & Hawkins, 2011; MacNell, Driscoll & Hunt, 2015). Instructor characteristic bias, including variables such as instructor personality, physical attractiveness, titles, age, and race and ethnicity may also influence student feedback. Factors beyond the instructor's control, such as class size or subjects that rely on quantitative methods, may play a part, too.

What can administrators look for in student feedback as they take potential biases into consideration? Awareness of the potential biases is an important step. Tangibly, administrators can pay attention if significantly different language is used to describe male and female professors. For example, are women referred to as teachers or Mrs./Ms. while men are referred to as professors or addressed as Dr. (suggesting that the students perceive men to have higher rank and/or competence)? Are students commenting on a woman's appearance?

TIP #3: If such differences are observed, administrators can note the presence of bias in the student feedback and disregard those comments during the annual review.

Aren't the comments the best part of the data?

Yes and no. Open-ended questions can give faculty members ideas about what worked or didn't work and offer possible suggestions from the students' perspectives. But these same written comments often demonstrate the strongest evidence of bias through negative comments about personality traits, appearance, mannerisms, competence, and professionalism (Flaherty, 2021).

TIP #4: Administrators can combat this by reminding their faculty to speak with students about the purpose of Student Course Feedback before inviting them to fill out the form.

Has the SmartEval electronic system resulted in lower ratings or a reduced response rate?

The response rate in the original pilot groups for SmartEvals was approximately 67%-72%. The response rate for the traditional pencil/paper evaluation process was 73%-78%. The current rate with SmartEvals is approximately 50% and seems to be influenced by encouragement to participate from the instructor of record.

TIP #5: Consider reminding your faculty that they have access to a personalized QR code by logging in to [SmartEvals](#). Providing class time and a QR code are excellent strategies to increase response rate. Best practice suggests that the instructor should leave the room before the evaluation time begins. If departmental resources allow, perhaps a staff member or graduate assistant can assist with monitoring the class as they complete the evaluation.

For additional tips to support faculty in interpreting Student Course Feedback data, see the white paper titled, "[How do Faculty Interpret their Student Evaluations.docx](#)". This white paper contains specific directions about interpreting quantitative data from student course feedback.

References

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