

# Teaching Evaluations: Perceptions Of Students And Faculty

Sandip Mukherji, Howard University, USA  
Narendra Rustagi, Howard University, USA

## ABSTRACT

*This study conducts a survey of students and faculty at a business school on critical issues regarding student evaluations of teaching and identifies several significant differences between their perceptions. Students agreed more strongly than faculty that evaluations are higher in courses where the instructor teaches effectively and students learn more. Students also agreed more than faculty that they give higher evaluations for more challenging courses and for courses requiring an above-average amount of work. Unlike students, faculty agreed that students give higher evaluations in courses where they expect to earn a higher grade than they deserve.*

**Keywords:** Teaching evaluations, students, faculty, survey

## INTRODUCTION

U.S. business schools commonly use student evaluations of teaching (SETs). Although there is considerable evidence supporting the validity of SETs, many faculty members express serious misgivings about them. Interestingly, students disagree with the skepticism of faculty regarding SETs. The negative perceptions of faculty, which are at odds with the perceptions of students, as well as the evidence regarding SETs, merit investigation. Most of the earlier studies of teaching evaluations used correlations or regressions to determine the influence of various factors on student evaluations. Correlations do not, however, imply causation and it is difficult to disentangle the effects of various factors. Surveys provide direct evidence on the impact of different factors on teaching evaluations. Since the culture of teaching, evaluation and associated factors may vary across institutions and disciplines, differences in perceptions are best studied by surveying students and faculty in the same discipline at the same institution. This study determines the perceptions of students and faculty on critical issues regarding student evaluations of teaching at a business school and identifies several significant differences between their perceptions.

## BACKGROUND

Comm and Mathaisel (1998) reported that 99% of business schools use SETs to evaluate teaching effectiveness. Marsh et al. (1975) found that student ratings of instructors are positively correlated with their performance on standardized final examinations, indicating that student evaluations are valid measures of instructional quality. In addition, Centra (1980) reported a fairly strong positive correlation between student ratings and student achievement, and d'Appolonia and Abrami (1997) found a positive correlation between student ratings and student learning.

In spite of evidence of their validity, many faculty members have reservations about SETs. Marsh and Overall (1981) found that 75% of faculty believed course difficulty has a negative impact, and 70% believed grade leniency has a positive impact on student ratings. Marsh (1987) reported that large percentages of faculty at a major research university indicated student evaluations are likely to be biased by course difficulty (72%), grading leniency (68%), and workload (60%). Yunker and Sterner (1988) found that faculty believed student evaluations are influenced by the instructor's personality. Simpson (1995) reported that faculty believed student ratings are negatively correlated with course workload and difficulty.

A survey of U.S. and international faculty members of the Academy of Marketing Science by Simpson and Siguaw (2000) revealed that, although 48% believed SETs are somewhat accurate or very accurate, 42% considered them to be somewhat inaccurate or not at all accurate. Another survey of faculty members in accounting departments at U.S. universities by Morgan et al. (2003) showed that 49% viewed student evaluations as an accurate indication of a teacher's effectiveness, but 46% viewed them as only sometimes an accurate indication of a teacher's effectiveness. Further, large proportions of faculty believed that evaluations are at least sometimes biased by type of course (63%), workload (63%), grades (54%), and the teacher's personality (50%).

Empirical evidence indicates that most of the misgivings of faculty members regarding SETs may be exaggerated. Marsh (1984) showed that student enthusiasm and prior interest account for much of the effects of extraneous variables on student ratings and concluded that aggregate assessments are not significantly influenced by non-teaching variables. Baird (1987) reported that students' perceived learning has a correlation of 0.86 with instructor evaluations and it explains a much larger portion of rating variance than actual grades. Marsh (1994) found that the overall summative evaluation is positively related to other teaching performance items in the SET form. McKeachie (1990) observed that student ratings are robust and "the best validated of all the practical sources of relevant data" (p. 195). Surveying the literature, Aleamoni (1999) reported that 24 studies reported no relationship between student ratings and grades, while 37 studies found significant positive relationships with a weak median correlation of 0.14. Marsh (1987) offered three possible explanations for the positive relationship between student ratings and grades. According to the grading leniency hypothesis, "instructors who give higher-than-deserved grades will be rewarded with higher-than-deserved student ratings" (p. 317). The validity hypothesis suggests that higher student grades reflect greater student learning, which yields higher student evaluations. The student characteristic hypothesis indicates that pre-existing differences in student characteristics, such as prior subject interest and motivation, explain differences in student ratings as well as grades. Greenwald and Gilmore (1997) showed that student evaluations are more strongly influenced by course difficulty, workload, and pace than by expected grades. Marsh and Roche (1997) found that students give higher evaluations to professors whose classes are more difficult and have a heavier workload. Cerrito (2000), however, indicated that courses that make the lowest time demands on students get the highest ratings. Based on an analysis of more than 50,000 college courses, Centra (2003) found that expected grades generally do not affect student evaluations after controlling for learning outcomes, and courses rated "just right" receive the highest evaluations, with lower ratings for courses that are difficult or too elementary. Heckert et al. (2006) showed that students give higher evaluations to courses where the difficulty level is appropriate and which require more effort; the positive relationship between effort and course evaluation cannot be explained by expected grades.

Some recent studies have used surveys, which provide direct evidence on the impact of different factors on teaching evaluations. A survey of business students at a U.S. university by Ahmadi et al. (2001) reported that 90% agreed or strongly agreed that they are serious, and 79% that they are objective, in completing SETs. Further, 81% agreed or strongly agreed that faculty evaluations are important and necessary, and 68% that student evaluations should affect faculty advancement. On the contrary, 77% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they give higher ratings to faculty members who give little or no homework. A majority also disagreed that they give higher ratings to faculty members who give easy exams. However, 63% agreed or strongly agreed that they give higher evaluations to faculty members with a good sense of humor. Sojka et al. (2002) reported the results of survey responses from 250 students and 81 faculty from arts and sciences, business, education, and engineering, at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Faculty agreed more than students that students do not treat SETs seriously. Students wanted SETs to be given more weight in promotion, tenure, and salary decisions, but faculty disagreed. Faculty believed more strongly than students that demanding less from students yields better evaluations. Faculty also indicated that student evaluations encourage lenient grading, but students believed much more strongly that they do not.

Differences in perceptions can be accurately identified only by surveying students and faculty in the same discipline at the same institution. In the only such study we are aware of, Lammers et al. (2005) analyzed survey responses from 387 business majors and 52 faculty at a public West Coast university regarding student effort required to earn specific grades. They found that faculty agreed more than students that grades reflect student performance, and students believed that higher grades require more effort than faculty did. Our study conducts a more comprehensive survey of students and faculty at a business school on critical issues related to student

evaluations of teaching, including the influence of the major extraneous factors about which faculty have expressed concern.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on anonymous surveys of students and faculty conducted in the spring semester of 2006 at a business school accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB). The student evaluation questionnaire used in the school prominently states at the top: “The information you provide will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. This questionnaire will be summarized along with the other students’ opinions in this class and the results will be given to the instructor, department chair, and school administration, and will also be available in the school library. Please be completely honest and candid with your responses.” We requested students to fill out our student survey forms in several courses in the School of Business that are required to be taken by all majors. The surveys were completed by 243 students, comprising 60 sophomores, 118 juniors, 34 seniors, and 31 graduate students. Freshman students were not surveyed because they didn’t have sufficient experience of taking business courses. There were 138 female and 105 male student respondents, consistent with the larger percentage of female students at the School. All faculty members were requested to complete the faculty survey forms at a School-wide faculty meeting. The surveys were completed by 38 faculty members, consisting of 4 instructors/lecturers, 15 assistant professors, 16 associate professors, and 3 professors. The respondents comprised 53% of the teaching faculty and consisted of 28 males and 10 females, reflecting the predominance of male faculty (71%) at the School.

The survey instruments required students and faculty to respond to most of the questions using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Although Likert scales contain ordinal data, they are often used with interval techniques for scales containing at least five items. Labovitz (1970) and Kim (1975) have reported that parametric coefficients are robust to ordinal distortion. In addition, a literature review by Jaccard and Wan (1996) indicated that even severe departures from intervalness do not significantly affect statistical tests based on Likert scales. Some of the survey questions required respondents to allocate percentages among different alternatives that had to sum to 100%. The answers to some of these questions by some respondents could not be used because the totals did not sum to 100%. Further, some respondents did not answer all the questions. We used all the usable responses by each respondent in compiling the data and conducting the tests. Therefore, the sample size is not constant for all the questions.

## **STUDENT RESPONSES**

Table 1 summarizes the student responses to the teaching evaluation survey. Students agreed that they can judge the teaching effectiveness of instructors, they are objective in filling out teaching evaluations, and they take the completion of teaching evaluation forms seriously. They also expressed mild agreement that student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty as well as the primary source for administrative evaluations of faculty teaching. However, students did not agree that faculty members treat the results of teaching evaluation forms seriously. The standard deviations indicate the most homogeneous response from students that they can judge the teaching effectiveness of instructors and the widest difference of opinion whether student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty. Students believed that, considering the level of the course, the difficulty and workload are appropriate for a majority of courses. Further, 32% of courses were considered to have a heavy workload, while only 14% have a light workload, and 27% of courses are hard, compared to 18% that are easy. This pattern is similar to the Greenwald and Gilmore (1997) study, where 54% of classes were rated “about right”, 25% to 39% were considered difficult, heavier, or faster, and 5% to 12% were rated as elementary, lighter workload or slower pace. Students considered the grading system to be appropriate in a majority of courses, strict in 27%, and lenient in 16% of courses. The grades received were perceived to be totally objective in 65%, and somewhat subjective in 35%, of courses. Faculty at the institution, therefore, generally do not appear to offer easy courses or lenient grades in order to get higher teaching evaluations. Further, most of the grades received by students are perceived to be totally objective.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Student Responses to Teaching Evaluation Survey**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
1. You can judge the teaching effectiveness of instructors of courses you take	243	4.37	0.73
2. You are objective in filling out teaching evaluations of courses you take	243	4.16	0.92
3. You take the completion of teaching evaluation forms seriously	243	4.12	0.95
4. Student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty on their teaching	242	3.74	1.16
5. Student evaluations should be the primary source for administrative evaluations of faculty teaching	240	3.60	1.13
6. Faculty members treat the results of teaching evaluation forms seriously	242	2.95	1.02
7. For the following percentages of courses taught in the School of Business, considering the level of the course, the degree of difficulty is:			
a) Appropriate	155	55%	26%
b) Hard	155	27%	21%
c) Easy	155	18%	17%
8. For the following percentages of courses taught in the School of Business, considering the level of the course, the amount of workload is:			
a) Appropriate	157	54%	25%
b) A Lot	157	32%	26%
c) Not Much	157	14%	14%
9. For the following percentages of courses taught in the School of Business, the grading system is:			
a) Appropriate	157	57%	25%
b) Strict	157	27%	22%
c) Lenient	157	16%	14%
10. For the following percentages of grades received by you in the School of Business, the grade received is:			
a) Totally Objective	162	65%	24%
b) Somewhat Subjective	162	35%	24%
If all other factors are the same, you give higher overall instructor evaluations in courses:			
11. Where the instructor teaches effectively	218	4.48	0.79
12. Where you learn more	225	4.44	0.70
13. Where you expect to earn a fair grade	218	4.13	0.93
14. Where you like the instructor's personality	219	4.09	0.99
15. That you have greater motivation to take	225	3.89	1.03
16. Which are more challenging than the average course at that level	221	3.59	0.97
17. Where you have to do an average amount of work for courses at that level	218	3.55	0.92
18. Which have average difficulty for courses at that level	218	3.46	0.93
19. Where you have to do an above-average amount of work for courses at that level	217	3.24	1.04
20. Where you expect to earn a higher grade than you deserve	217	2.98	1.12
21. Which are easier than the average course at that level	219	2.95	1.07
22. Where you have to do a below-average amount of work for courses at that level	217	2.72	1.12

Students agreed most strongly that, if all other factors are the same, they give higher overall instructor evaluations in courses where the instructor teaches effectively and where they learn more. They also agreed that they

give higher evaluations in courses where they expect to earn a fair grade, where they like the instructor's personality, and that they have greater motivation to take. Students expressed slightly more agreement that they give higher evaluations in courses that are more challenging, compared to courses that have average difficulty, and they did not agree that they give higher evaluations in easier courses. Greenwald and Gilmore (1997) also reported that courses that are somewhat elementary, or have a lighter workload and pace, are rated slightly lower, but contrary to our result, they found that student ratings increase as courses go from being too difficult to about right. Students agreed more that they give higher evaluations in courses where they have to do an average amount of work, compared to courses requiring an above-average amount of work, and they did not agree that they give higher ratings to courses requiring a below-average amount of work. Finally, students did not agree that they give higher evaluations in courses where they expect to earn a higher grade than they deserve. Based on the standard deviations, the greatest agreement among students was that they give higher evaluations where they learn more and their greatest disagreements were whether courses where they earn a higher grade than they deserve, or do a below-average amount of work, get higher ratings.

These responses suggest that, while students do give higher evaluations for non-teaching characteristics, such as the instructor's personality and prior motivation, what they value most are teaching effectiveness and degree of learning. Further, challenging and average-difficulty courses are evaluated higher than easy courses, and average or above-average workloads are valued more than below-average workloads. Finally, students give higher evaluations for earning a fair grade, but not for earning a higher grade than they deserve.

## **FACULTY RESPONSES**

Table 2 shows that faculty members agreed that they treat the results of teaching evaluations seriously and mildly agreed that students can judge the teaching effectiveness of instructors. However, they did not agree that students take the completion of teaching evaluations seriously, students are objective in filling out teaching evaluations, and student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty on their teaching. Further, faculty disagreed that student evaluations should be the primary source of administrative evaluations. The standard deviations show the most homogeneous response among faculty that they treat the results of teaching evaluations seriously and their greatest diversity of opinion whether student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty, which is the item that students also had the greatest disagreement about. Faculty considered the degree of difficulty to be appropriate in 60%, hard in 35%, and easy in 5% of courses. Further, they believed that the workload is appropriate in 64%, heavy in 33%, and light in 3% of courses. Faculty considered the grading system to be appropriate in 74%, strict in 21%, and lenient in 5% of courses. They believed that 88% of grades given are totally objective, while 12% are somewhat subjective.

Faculty agreed most strongly that students give higher evaluations in courses where they like the instructor's personality and that they have greater motivation to take. Faculty also generally agreed that students give higher evaluations in courses where the instructor teaches effectively, where students expect to earn a fair grade, where they learn more, and where they expect to earn a higher grade than they deserve. Further, faculty agreed more that students give higher evaluations in courses where they have to do an average amount of work, compared to courses requiring below-average or above-average amounts of work. Faculty also agreed slightly more that students give higher evaluations for courses that have average difficulty than those that are more challenging or easier than average. The standard deviations indicate the greatest agreement among faculty was that students give higher evaluations where they like the instructor's personality and the greatest disagreement among them was whether evaluations are higher where students earn a higher grade than they deserve, an item that students also disagreed most about.

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Faculty Responses to Teaching Evaluation Survey**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
1. Students can judge the teaching effectiveness of instructors of courses they take	36	3.86	0.93
2. Students are objective in filling out teaching evaluations of courses they take	38	2.92	1.10
3. Students take the completion of teaching evaluation forms seriously	38	3.03	1.10
4. Student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty on their teaching	38	2.68	1.32
5. Student evaluations should be the primary source for administrative evaluations of faculty teaching	38	2.29	1.18
6. You treat the results of teaching evaluation forms seriously	38	4.26	0.86
7. For the following percentages of courses taught by you, considering the level of the course, the degree of difficulty is:			
Appropriate	36	60%	36%
Hard	36	35%	36%
Easy	36	5%	8%
8. For the following percentages of courses taught by you, considering the level of the course, the amount of workload is:			
Appropriate	35	64%	36%
A Lot	35	33%	37%
Not Much	35	3%	6%
9. For the following percentages of courses taught by you, the grading system is:			
Appropriate	32	74%	29%
Strict	32	21%	27%
Lenient	32	5%	8%
10. For the following percentages of grades given by you in the School of Business, the grade given is:			
Totally Objective	35	88%	14%
Somewhat Subjective	35	12%	14%
If all other factors are the same, students give higher overall instructor evaluations in courses:			
11. Where the instructor teaches effectively	37	4.08	1.01
12. Where they learn more	37	3.84	1.09
13. Where they expect to earn a fair grade	37	4.00	0.78
14. Where they like the instructor's personality	37	4.22	0.71
15. That they have greater motivation to take	36	4.14	0.90
16. Which are more challenging than the average course at that level	37	3.16	1.12
17. Where they have to do an average amount of work for courses at that level	37	3.41	0.93
18. Which have average difficulty for courses at that level	37	3.24	0.89
19. Where they have to do an above-average amount of work for courses at that level	37	2.81	1.13
20. Where they expect to earn a higher grade than they deserve	37	3.70	1.20
21. Which are easier than the average course at that level	37	3.16	1.09
22. Where they have to do a below-average amount of work for courses at that level	36	2.89	1.12

**Table 3**  
**Comparison of Student and Faculty Responses to Teaching Evaluation Survey**

	Mean Score		Difference in Mean Scores	T-stat.
	Students	Faculty		
1. Students can judge the teaching effectiveness of instructors of courses they take	4.37**	3.86	0.51	3.12
2. Students are objective in filling out teaching evaluations of courses they take	4.16**	2.92	1.24	6.62
3. Students take the completion of teaching evaluation forms seriously	4.12**	3.03	1.09	5.80
4. Student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty on their teaching	3.74**	2.68	1.06	4.68
5. Student evaluations should be the primary source for administrative evaluations of faculty teaching	3.60**	2.29	1.31	6.40
6. Faculty members treat the results of teaching evaluation forms seriously	2.95	4.26**	-1.21	-8.54
7. For the following percentages of courses taught in the School of Business, considering the level of the course, the degree of difficulty is:				
a) Appropriate	55%	60%	-5%	-0.95
b) Hard	27%	35%	-8%	-1.89
c) Easy	18%**	5%	13%	4.57
8. For the following percentages of courses taught in the School of Business, considering the level of the course, the amount of workload is:				
a) Appropriate	54%	64%	-10%	-1.92
b) A Lot	32%	33%	-1%	-0.12
c) Not Much	14%**	3%	11%	4.28
9. For the following percentages of courses taught in the School of Business, the grading system is:				
a) Appropriate	57%	74%**	-17%	-3.42
b) Strict	27%	21%	6%	1.31
c) Lenient	16%**	5%	11%	4.40
10. For the following percentages of grades received by students in the School of Business, the grade received is:				
a) Totally Objective	65%	88%**	-23%	-5.63
b) Somewhat Subjective	35%**	12%	23%	5.63
If all other factors are the same, students give higher overall instructor evaluations in courses:				
11. Where the instructor teaches effectively	4.48*	4.08	0.40	2.27
12. Where they learn more	4.44**	3.84	0.60	3.27
13. Where they expect to earn a fair grade	4.13	4.00	0.13	0.93
14. Where they like the instructor's personality	4.09	4.22	-0.13	-0.96
15. That they have greater motivation to take	3.89	4.14	-0.25	-1.52
16. Which are more challenging than the average course at that level	3.59*	3.16	0.43	2.21
17. Where they have to do an average amount of work for courses at that level	3.55	3.41	0.14	0.85
18. Which have average difficulty for courses at that level	3.46	3.24	0.22	1.38
19. Where they have to do an above-average amount of work for courses at that level	3.24*	2.81	0.43	2.16
20. Where they expect to earn a higher grade than they deserve	2.98	3.70**	-0.72	-3.44
21. Which are easier than the average course at that level	2.95	3.16	-0.21	-1.10
22. Where they have to do a below-average amount of work for courses at that level	2.72	2.89	-0.17	-0.85

\*\*Significantly higher at the 1% level.

\*Significantly higher at the 5% level.

## COMPARISON OF STUDENT AND FACULTY RESPONSES

Table 3 indicates several significant differences between the responses of students and faculty. Students agreed more strongly than faculty that they can judge the teaching effectiveness of instructors. Unlike faculty, students agreed that they are objective in filling out teaching evaluations and take the completion of teaching evaluations seriously, and that student evaluations should be the primary source of feedback to faculty as well as administrative evaluations. By contrast, unlike students, faculty members agreed that they treat the results of teaching evaluations seriously. Students considered more courses to be easy, and to have a light workload, than faculty did. Faculty believed the grading system to be appropriate in more courses, and lenient in fewer courses, compared to students. Faculty believed that more grades are totally objective and less are somewhat subjective than students did. Students agreed more strongly than faculty that evaluations are higher in courses where the instructor teaches effectively and students learn more. Students also agreed more than faculty that they give higher evaluations for more challenging courses and for courses requiring an above-average amount of work. Unlike students, faculty agreed that students give higher evaluations in courses where they expect to earn a higher grade than they deserve.

## CONCLUSION

This study identifies several significant differences between the perceptions of students and faculty regarding student evaluations of teaching at a business school. The findings have important practical implications. Since faculty members treat teaching evaluations seriously, students should be more willing to invest time and effort in filling them out. Since students are serious and objective in filling out teaching evaluations, faculty should have more faith in their results. Faculty did not agree that student evaluations should be the primary source of administrative evaluation and feedback, and even students only mildly agreed with these propositions, suggesting greater use of other sources, such as peer reviews.

Faculty are more likely to get higher evaluations by teaching effectively and enhancing student learning than by giving students higher grades than they deserve. Since students consider more courses to be easy and to have a light workload than faculty do, and they are least likely to give higher evaluations in courses that are easy or require little work, faculty who are teaching such courses may actually increase their student ratings by raising the difficulty and workload of their courses. Student misgivings regarding subjective grades indicate that grading methods need to be communicated more effectively to students.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Dr. Sandip Mukherji**, CFA, is a Professor of Finance and Director of the UBS Simulation, Learning, and Research Lab at Howard University. He has completed several faculty internships at Goldman Sachs, Bank of New York, and Cooper's & Lybrand and served as Chair of the Business School's Faculty Development and Teaching Committee. He has published 27 research papers on finance and education issues in 17 refereed journals. His research papers have been cited in top journals and popular magazines.

**Dr. Narendra K. Rustagi** is a tenured Professor and Chair of the Department of Information Systems and Decision Sciences at Howard University. He earned undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Delhi, and also earned master's and Ph.D. degrees from Ohio State University. He has authored a book on the simulation of the Indian crop insurance program and has several articles in journals and conferences on issues of competitiveness, applications of quantitative techniques and statistics, assessment of programs and strategy for the development of online programs and use of online programs for knowledge transfer.

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NOTES