



Date: May 14, 2019

Memorandum to: Katherine Fleming, Provost

From: Wen Ling
Chairperson, T-Faculty Senators Council
A/Y 2018-2019

Subject: T-Faculty Senators Council Report on Student Response Rates to Teaching Evaluations

The T-Faculty Senators Council submits the attached report regarding student evaluations of teaching (SETs) at NYU.

cc: Gigi Dopico, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs
Carol Morrow, Vice Provost
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Nicholas Economides, T-FSC Vice Chairperson
Amanda Watson, T-FSC Secretary

David Irving, T-FSC Educational Policies and Faculty/Student Relations Co-Chair
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MEMO TO: Tenure Faculty Senators Council

FROM: T-FSC Educational Policies and Faculty/Student Relations
Committee A/Y 2019-2020
Committee Members: Sonia Das, Michael Garabedian,
Anna Harvey, David K Irving, Robert Lapiner, Gwendolyn Quinn,
Arthur Tannenbaum

RE: Report on Student Response Rates to Teaching Evaluations

This report has been written to contribute to a university-wide conversation about student evaluations of teaching (SETs) at NYU. Across the university, the major preoccupations have been with A) how questions are formulated and the credible evidence of inherent bias of various kinds that compromise their reliability; B) how they are used by students, by the faculty whose courses are being evaluated, and not the least by academic administrators in evaluating faculty performance; and C) how to reverse the decline in student response rates since the introduction of the online modality.

As the Provost's standing Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee, the C-FSC, and a number of school-based academic committees have also been considering these issues--especially those in the first two categories--the Educational Policies and Faculty/Student Relations Committee felt it could be most useful by focusing on #C-exploring what could be done to improve the student response rate. It must nonetheless be clearly understood that whatever changes in policies or methods of administration of the SETs might be considered, they should only be implemented after identified problems in the instrument itself and its use are remedied.

Since the Fall, the committee and/or the committee co-chairs have consulted with various university constituents including administrators from Steinhardt, faculty representatives from the C-FSC, faculty representatives from the Center for the Advancement of Teaching, student representatives, and Clay Shirky, Vice Provost for Educational Technologies.

BACKGROUND.

At present each school administers the SET on-line, incorporating the same required seven-questions that are uniform across NYU, along with additional questions that are tailored by the schools (and in some cases, individual departments).

THE USERS. Teaching Evaluations inform and serve three key constituents at NYU:

Students.

Some students complete the on-line SET to register their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the classroom experience. Many students read the results on Albert to inform their selection of courses for which they intend to register.

Faculty.

The teaching faculty ideally use the evaluations to review, reflect on and, if called for, alter their class syllabus and/or their pedagogy to better shape their class to embrace new content and/or teaching strategies, as well as to address the needs and desires of the students to improve student learning.

Administrators

SETs are considered in the evaluation of faculty teaching effectiveness, by department chairs, deans, in various important committee processes (such as review, re-appointment, promotion, or nominations for Distinguished Teacher Awards).

The T-FSC Educational Policies and Faculty/Student Relations Committee seeks to ensure that SETs are used primarily in the interests of identifying and cultivating good teaching. As referenced above, while our attention has been directed primarily to the issue of disappointing student response rates, issues such as bias in the instrument itself and the consequent misinterpretation of the SET data should be thoroughly examined.

Although the shift to online from in-class paper SETs has streamlined the process, one of the conspicuous results has been a reduction in the student response rate. There are wide variations among schools—but all have experienced a decline. At present at NYU the student response rate fluctuates between 30-85%. Lower response rates make it difficult to properly read the temperature of a class. A response rate below 30% renders the instrument ineffective.

Solutions to increase response rates exist.

Our committee members have found an extensive body of practice-based research, that documents efforts undertaken at institutions around the country that have faced similar declines in SET completion rates linked to ‘going online.’

At NYU, within individual schools, we found a number of creative solutions that have improved outcomes, including incentivizing peer-pressure to award prizes and gift cards once whole classes reach certain thresholds. Approaches tend to encourage (rather than compel) students to fill out and submit an on-line SET.

Nationwide and in some NYU schools, by far the most productive means by which to get a good result is for the instructor to set aside time during class to a) explain the

importance of the SETs, b) assure the students that their input is taken seriously, and c) have the students fill out and submit the evaluations online then and there. One of the representatives from Center for the Advancement of Teaching (CAT) suggested the instructor lay the groundwork as to the value of SETs early on in every course.

Our research uncovered one “technologically-enhanced” method that is in place at other institutions. Tying the submission of an evaluation as a condition of receiving a grade would certainly be a strong inducement. The University of Pennsylvania encourages students to fill out the evaluations at the moment they try to view their grades online at the end of the semester. Before the grade can be made visible, if a student hasn’t filled out the evaluation, they have to click on a tab indicating that they have chosen to “opt out” of the evaluation process. At Barnard, a system of delayed access is in place: students who do not submit an evaluation form are blocked from viewing their grade online in that course for three weeks.

NYU of course provides significant autonomy among schools. (And that also makes a universal “technology-fix” all the more difficult, even if it were desirable.) So while it is unlikely the Provost would seek to compel schools to follow a single model, there are some existing practices—and opportunities for experimentation—in our diverse academic environment. For instance, at Gallatin, the course evaluation process entails two components: completion of an in-classroom *paper* form for written comments, as well as completion of the online form (available through Albert).

Promising solutions (and attitudinal and administrative adjustments) could also emerge from each of the three constituent communities for whom the SETs are important—to reduce the risks of SET results being misapplied.

Students

Faculty and academic staff advisors should emphasize to students the different means of ‘research’ when selecting a class and/or an instructor. The Internet (Rate My Professor and even the NYU on-line postings) is only one source. Students could take advantage of faculty office hours to interview a teacher to determine whether or not to spend fourteen weeks in his/her class.

The Students Senators offered several concrete suggestions to encourage a higher response rate to SETs. Echoing the recommendation from CAT, to ingrain the importance of evaluations, students encouraged faculty to explain early in the semester the importance of engaging in the process; to include filling out an SET as an assignment listed in the syllabus; and to incorporate a segment highlighting the value of faculty office hours and the importance of SETs in each school’s freshman or new student orientations. They are in agreement with faculty that setting aside time at the end of the class to fill out an evaluation form is the most effective means by which to engage students.

Faculty.

Our faculty care about the quality of their teaching and habitually welcome constructive insights into their effectiveness. The SETs should be taken seriously, but contextualized. Peer-to-peer classroom observations have proven to be consistently powerful collegial means by which instructors can receive experience-rich feedback about their pedagogy, and build on what they do well, and above all be supported in their efforts to improve. Especially for new faculty—whether tenure-track, clinical, or adjunct—it is important that disappointing SETs should lead to opportunities for assistance and investment in self-directed improvement, not to being judged prematurely.

Conceiving the SETs therefore as a helpful tool (if needed) for self-correction (rather than a potential threat) might induce more faculty members to talk up the importance of the instrument to their students—and make time for in-class electronic submission.

Academic Administrators

The T-FSC Educational Policies and Faculty/Student Relations Committee members are unanimous in our concern that a number of studies have documented various kinds of inherent bias within teaching evaluations. (And thus the attention in the UAAC and elsewhere to modifying the instrument—and the formulation of the questions--to minimize the incidence of bias is an absolute priority.) When the evidence of bias is coupled with the anxiety surrounding reviews and promotion—especially for new faculty and our continuing contract faculty colleagues--it has been suggested by several committee members to consider the precedents of other institutions, such as the University of Southern California, which has officially determined the need to minimize SETs in the review and promotions process (including AMI determinations).

Adhering to such a policy at NYU would be beneficial, at the least until such time as the problems with the SETS have been improved to the satisfaction of those concerned. At that point—and we hope it comes soon—faculty and administrators working together should implement strategies to improve the response rates, drawing upon the practice-based research that is widely available. Of course it should be noted that given the relative autonomy of and differences among our schools, initiatives should go forward when their respective faculty councils and administrations are in sync and ready to innovate. Indeed, that will make it easier to learn from each other and foster ways to emulate the best homegrown examples.