PREPARING STUDENTS TO TAKE COURSE EVALUATIONS – TIPS FOR FACULTY

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Introduction

Why should you talk to your students about the importance of course evaluations?

Talking to students about how results are typically used and how to provide constructive feedback can help improve the usefulness of the results to you and to your teaching.

- **Improve response rates and improve the value of results:**

  Students commonly suspect that course evaluation results do not get used; this is one reason for low response rates. Demonstrating that student feedback matters can boost response rates and provide you with a more accurate representation of students' experiences.

- **Improve student engagement and learning:**

  A conversation about evaluations can help establish rapport with your students. Discussing what sorts of responses are helpful for you, and why, can help students understand your teaching methods and the course learning goals. Students tend to respond better and "step up to the plate" when they understand how teaching methods connect with learning goals.

Talking to students can boost response rates and help improve the usefulness of the results

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Talking Points to Use with Students

Reassure students that the online course evaluation system is designed to protect confidentiality.

- When students sign in with their Network ID (NID) to access online course evaluations through WSU's Blue course evaluation system, the NID is used to confirm that they are a registered student in the courses they are evaluating, but their names are NOT associated with their responses to the evaluations.

- Instructors do not see any results of course evaluations until after final grades are posted. Results are compiled and are not connected to any student names. Written comments are provided exactly as students wrote them.

- Instructors can see response rates while the course evaluation is open, but no results.

- In order for students to receive credit for completing a course evaluation, before grades are due, their instructors can access a list of the names of students who completed the course evaluation. No results are available with the list of names.

Talk to students about how course evaluations are used and by whom

Instructors can use course evaluation results to improve courses and teaching.

- Let your students know that you value their feedback, that their experiences help you make decisions about the course. Provide students with examples of changes that you have made in the past as a result of course evaluations and/or identify something you continued—an assignment, a reading, an activity—based on positive student responses. Giving a midterm evaluation and sharing some of the results and your response is also a good way to boost response rates for the end-of-term course evaluation. (A midterm evaluation can be as simple as two questions on a half sheet of paper: What is working? What isn't working?)

- Courses and curriculum are always evolving, so student feedback about their experience in their courses is critical to instructors and departments.

- Some tips about talking to students about how you interpret and use evaluation results in your teaching choices:

  o There are some things you cannot change or may choose not to change, so let the students know your reasons and what your goal is (you will not eliminate exams, for example, because they assess certain learning goals).

  o Note that since students have different learning styles, you can't make the course perfect for each of them; you are balancing many needs and styles. For example, it's useful for students who don't like discussions to see that many other students do.

  o Pose this question to students: If evaluations contain contrasting opinions, how do instructors know which ones to focus on? You can discuss how you look for patterns and trends in student responses when considering an evaluation. (See *"Making Sense of Student Ratings and Feedback: A Quick Guide for Instructors,"* available on ATL's website.)

Departments and Department Chairs use course evaluation results.

- Department chairs typically use course evaluation results as part of the annual review of an instructor's job performance.

- Departments want to know what the student experience is like in their courses and in the curriculum overall, and they watch for patterns in course evaluations over time.

- Departments can use course evaluation results as one source of data to inform decisions about the curriculum. Example: If students consistently comment that the same material is repeated in several different required courses, or if they comment that they did not feel prepared by prerequisites for subsequent courses, faculty can consider these comments in conjunction with other sources of information, such as assessment results from the program/courses. If warranted, they can review the curriculum and make changes in course material or course requirements for the major.

Provide students with examples of changes that you have made as a result of course evaluations

Help students learn to recognize and give constructive criticism

Let students know that specific constructive comments from them can help you know where to focus your efforts to improve the course for student learning. Help them understand what types of comments are most useful. Most of us at some point in our lives will be asked to give feedback on the work of others (peers, colleagues, supervisors, employees) yet many of us do not get any training in this skill.

- Provide examples of useful, specific comments from your past evaluations.

- Offer a list of the qualities of effective feedback. For example, the following list is adapted from Marilla D. Svinicki [Svinicki, M. (2001). Encouraging Your Students to Give Feedback. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 87*]. Feedback should:

    - be specific, using examples familiar to the individual

    - avoid personalization or emotionally charged wording

    - describe the effect the behavior has on the giver so that the receiver can experience it from a different perspective

    - offer alternatives to the behavior being criticized

    - point out strengths along with weaknesses

- Give a short practice activity in class, 5-10 minutes. Guide students through the following exercise or create something similar using your own examples. Ask them to rate the helpfulness of different comments (see sample sets below) on a scale of 1 to 4 (1=not helpful/4=extremely helpful). Only display one comment at a time starting with the first one, and have students rate that comment before showing the next one, A through D. Likely, some students will have to re-evaluate their earlier scores as you reveal the increasingly specific and constructive comments. Talk about what distinguishes each comment from the next in terms of how useful they might be to the person receiving them.

Two Example Sets for a Constructive Feedback Exercise:

A. "I loved this class! This professor is awesome!"

B. "I learned a lot from the group project."

C. "Creating our group project really helped me apply the concepts in the textbook and now I think I understand them better than I could have if I'd only read about them."

D. "Creating our group project really helped me apply the concepts in the textbook and now I think I understand them better than I could have if I'd only read about them. Having the grading rubric at the beginning of the project helped us see what concepts and skills we were supposed to demonstrate and how."

A. "I hated the lectures."

B. "The lectures were boring."

C. "The lectures were boring. I had a hard time focusing because there was no outline to help us follow along."

D. "I had a hard time staying focused during lectures and I got confused because there was no outline to help us follow along. And some pictures might have been helpful to illustrate concepts like meiosis and mitosis."