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Modification of Student Evaluation Questionnaire-Open-Ended Questions

Submitted by Nick DeBonis

4/14/2013

Discussion:

This is to request that changes to the student evaluation questionnaire be considered, specifically Section II Open-Ended Questions. 1. Each current question should be two separate questions. 2. There needs to be a direction included which requires that specific examples for comments be provided. A full discussion is included in the attachment.

Rationale:

Student Evaluations are administered university wide.

Response:

5/28/2013: The SEC did not approve this item for inclusion on the agenda of the June 4th senate meeting. Instead, the SEC will form an ad-hoc committee whose charge will be to review student evaluation forms and procedures, and, if applicable, make recommendations for changes to the senate.

The impetus for this discussion request is based on my latest experience with student evaluations. Its intent, however, isn't personal, but is to stimulate a discussion about issues related specifically to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire.

The first issue is the validity of the open-ended questions.

"What did you like best about this instructor/course?" is a poorly conceived, poorly written question. First, it's two questions in one. It's comparable to asking "What did you like best about Georgia Southern/Statesboro?" Any experienced researcher would tell you that these should be asked separately.

Second, "like" is completely subjective and has little if anything to do with whether or not the instructor or the course enhanced students' learning. A more effective question would be something along the lines of "What about this course helped you effectively learn and apply the content?"

Similarly, "How could this instructor/course be improved?" should be separate questions. For example, "How could this instructor have improved the learning experience to make it more effective for you?" "How could this course be improved to make the learning experience more effective for you?"

For both sets of questions, there's no direction which says that, for the response to be considered, provide specific examples. This results in feedback which is more subjective than objective.

Neither "s/he's a great teacher" or "s/he's rude" is feedback which can be used to make adjustments to a course or a teaching/learning approach. "S/he's a great teacher BECAUSE s/he spent time with me in one-to-one review of materials I didn't understand" or "S/he was rude because s/he didn't respond to my emails on the same day" provides substantive, actionable information.

"Fewer tests" as a response to "How could this instructor/course be improved?" doesn't indicate whether or not the student is directing this to the instructor or is about the course. "The professor has a test every week, even in the middle of units. Tests should be at the end of a unit" is an unambiguous suggestion. "Fewer tests" also begs the question. How many tests were there? One, one a week, one a month? The comment would be interpreted differently if the number of tests was set by the department for all of the same classes.

Students have a responsibility to participate honestly and ethically in the evaluation process as it is intended, to provide feedback which can be used to enhance and/or improve the learning process. It's not intended to be a popularity referendum or a punitive "payback" opportunity. There are online rating sites for the latter.

While the administration instructions to students are “to complete the evaluation without discussion,” when students are being candid and honest, they admit that the evaluations are discussed before the fact. This explains why, for a number of faculty, comments with common language and tone show up in evaluations in the same class.

I’ve been on committees at other universities who have worked to make sure that student evaluation questionnaires are relevant, valid and reliable. I’ve spent several weeks trying to find out who at GSU would be responsible for considering suggested modifications to the open-ended questions, for example. I haven’t been successful. Perhaps this public forum can generate some productive discussion.

In order for the student evaluation process to fulfill its objective will require a cultural sea change, which is never easy to accomplish. That shouldn’t eliminate it as an objective at GSU. /s/ JND