



Review of the Student Course Evaluation Instrument Summary Recommendations

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May 2018

After a wide-ranging process that included a review of student ratings research and practices and consultations with faculty and students, the Committee proposes a series of recommendations for the continued use and enhancement of student ratings data.

- 1. Reframe the process:** The Committee advocates for the continued use of student feedback at Brown because information about students' experiences in a course are an important component in a rich system for the review of teaching. Although useful, student ratings should not be considered "evaluations" of teaching; instead, assessment of teaching effectiveness is the purview of academic units and of TPAC, ideally using multiple sources of evidence or measures of student learning (Linse, 2016). To emphasize the importance of reframing student ratings, the Committee recommends changing the name of the instrument from "course evaluation" to the "Course Feedback Form."
- 2. Revise the form, with enhanced options for tailoring:** In response to positive student and faculty feedback about the new instrument, we propose implementing a single new Course Feedback Form in Spring 2019, with slight variations for faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and undergraduate teaching assistants. (See Appendix J of the [report](#) for form.) Because they have been tested as a cohesive unit, we recommend a single main form and that all questions be required. However, we suggest that faculty and graduate TAs have the option of adding questions from an item bank. (See Appendix K of the [report](#) for optional questions suggested during our planning process.) Further, because most faculty do not take advantage of the ability to customize their Course Feedback Forms, we suggest technical enhancements to facilitate ease of use. Outreach about these features should be ongoing.
- 3. Mitigate potential for bias:** The committee discussed at length the role of bias in student ratings and strategies for mitigating such bias. We do not question that Course Feedback

Forms -- like any human evaluation system -- likely contain an element of bias. However, international scholarship is still emerging about the potential role of bias in Course Feedback Forms and implications for effect size and interpretation.¹ Informed by extant research, the questions that were piloted were developed with the goal of mitigating bias to the greatest degree possible (while acknowledging that it may be impossible to completely eliminate bias from any student ratings instrument). The instrument should include questions that ask students to focus on specific instructional behaviors (rather than relying solely on a student's holistic judgment of the instructor) and reflection on their learning, cited in other personnel studies and ratings reports as a mechanism to mitigate bias (Bauer & Baltes, 2002; Yale College Teaching and Learning Committee, 2016). For example, of the two required Likert-scale questions on the previous instrument, both are very broad evaluative items (e.g., Please indicate your evaluation of the effectiveness of the course overall; Please indicate your evaluation of the instructor's overall effectiveness). Instead, in building to these global items, we suggest additional questions to prompt student reflection about specific behaviors associated with teaching effectiveness (e.g., questions about clarity and organization, with specific examples of ways these could be expressed) and students' reflections on their learning gains (e.g., questions about level of challenge and new understandings attributed to the course). We also recommend that the new instrument (Appendix J of the [report](#)) include a preface reminding students of the professional nature of Course Feedback Forms and the importance of offering specific feedback in response to open-ended items.

4. **Ensure that the instrument reflects University values:** In alignment with the University's priorities to cultivate diversity and inclusion, as well as academic integrity (as recommended by the Committee on Reviewing Brown's Academic Code Policies and Procedures 2018), we recommend the addition of two open-ended items:
 - Did the instructor foster an environment where all students - including yourself - were treated with respect and their questions and perspectives welcomed? How did the instructor accomplish this?
 - In what ways did the instructor communicate the expectations for academic integrity (e.g., sufficient citations of source material, clarity on collaboration policy)? What additional steps could the instructor have taken to communicate these expectations?

¹ Studies have examined how different factors may affect bias, including: faculty at different career stages, an instructor's identity (or perceived identity) in relationship to course content, and alignment between a student's identity and their perception of the instructor's identity (e.g., Basow & Martin, 2012; Linse, 2016; Mengel, Sauermaun, Zölitz, 2018).

5. **Make responses visible to the University community:** The committee recommends greater transparency of Course Feedback Form responses:
 - Make responses to all close-ended items and comments available to senior administrators, deans, directors, and chairs to allow for institution-wide evaluation and assessment of the student experience of teaching at Brown.
 - Make summarized responses to all close-ended items (questions 1-9) and all responses to one open-ended item (What would you like to say about this course to a student who is considering taking it in the future?) available via password protection to all members of the Brown community. Student ratings feedback should be visible for courses taught by faculty who have been at Brown for more than three years (six terms); others may also opt in. Ideally this display will be located in Banner, and a summary will be available in Courses@Brown (alongside the Critical Review). Faculty should have the option to petition the Office of the Dean of the College to remove comments that are offensive or violate Brown's code of conduct. Due to student records concerns, we recommend that results about teaching assistants and graduate instructors not be made public.

6. **Enhance Brown's approach to evaluating teaching.** In alignment with recommendations made by the NEASC visiting team and consistent with many of our Ivy+ peers (Appendix L of the [report](#)), the Committee recommends a multi-modal approach to evaluation of teaching at Brown, encouraging all departments to use Course Feedback Forms and at least one other source of data addressing teaching effectiveness (e.g., peer observation of teaching, direct measurement of learning outcomes, peer examination of student work). Extant literature recommends evaluating different dimensions of teaching effectiveness, including content expertise, engagement, and course design (Theall & Arreola, 2006). The Committee also recommends that the University consider enhancing the annual review template to allow instructors to enter pedagogical goals and related professional development. This may be another important avenue for the university to mitigate potential bias. Research suggests that instructor identity significantly impacts time allocated to teaching-related activities (O'Meara, Kuvaeva, Nyunt, Waugaman, & Jackson, 2018); such efforts are often undervalued or unrecognized.

7. **Revisit the Course Feedback Form regularly.** We suggest that the instrument be reviewed again in five years, in the interest of keeping it up to date with new scholarship of teaching and learning, as well as to study questions of bias.