

# An Alternative End-of-Semester Questionnaire

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The end-of-semester instrument completed by students has become pervasive throughout higher education. Typically, it is viewed as an unbiased tool (as students are considered objective observers) that can be used to measure teachers' performances (Hinton 1993). Concomitantly, the instrument is increasingly promoted and understood as the principal avenue, if not the only means, for collecting information for assessing professors as effective teachers. What almost all champions of the use of such forms fail to acknowledge is that they embody particular assumptions about teaching, learning, and academic standards. Consequently, it is more appropriate to view the instrument as a survey of student perceptions that provides little in the way of objective observations (Hinton 1993; Kolitch and Dean 1999).

Whatever position one embraces, even if one advocates surveying faculty rather than students (Hinton 1993, 568), efforts to increase accountability in and assessment of higher education will inevitably involve having students fill out evaluation forms, the results of which will play a significant role in determining a professor's professional success. For this reason, it has become important to develop an alternative end-of-semester instrument directly tied to a set of teaching and learning values and which provides professors with useful information.

Traditional instruments have been criticized as poor measures of teaching effectiveness and as lacking convincing validity and reliability (see Hinton 1993; Langbein 1994; Wilson 1998). Professors often are frustrated as there is little, if any, connection between changes in teaching (such as incorporating critical think-

ing exercises or assigning superior readings) and the ensuing ratings. However, instructors can improve their scores by engaging in superficial behaviors and gestures, dressing casually, flattering the political biases of students, bribing them by canceling some of their classes, or teaching undemanding courses (see Trout 1997a). Other research suggests a charismatic style of delivery, even though the content may lack meaning, is the crucial factor for getting high ratings (Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Williams and Ceci 1997).

With respect to learning, the traditional instrument embodies a student-as-consumer analogy. Treating students as consumers promotes and rewards students who are passive learners (Snare 1998), cripples student commitment (McMillan and Cheney 1996), contributes to students' misunderstandings of assessment (Cheney, McMillan, and Schwartzman 1997), and nurtures the entertainment model of the classroom (McMillan and Cheney 1996). With regard to academic standards, data from business leaders (Fialka 1995), professors (Trout 1997b, 30), and students (Astin 1993; Kuh 1999) seem to indicate professors have been negatively impacted by use of standard student evaluation instruments (see also Kernan 1999; Leo 1996; Sacks 1996).

The survey presented in the Appendix was developed by faculty at Middle Georgia College specifically to address the weaknesses identified with traditional instruments. It asks students to assess their own learning efforts in and out of class as well as their personal responses to the learning process rather than the instructor. Specifically, the survey, first administered during the 1998-99 school year, can be divided into three general components. Part I (questions 1 through 8) consists of profile or screening questions. Answers to these questions provide the means for distinguishing students regarding expected grade or amount of effort expended. Questions 9 through 15 concentrate on student responsibil-

ity issues and questions 16 through 27 seek to ascertain how the student experienced the course with respect to standards, teaching, learning, and the learning process. The last three questions are used to monitor the professionalism of part-time faculty.

For each course, a mean score, modal score, standard deviation, and a distribution across the possible answers for each of the questions are generated, as are mean scores for each item for all classes within the college. Mean scores for each item within the various disciplines (such as history, economics, and business) are compiled, as is a professor's composite score based on responses to questions 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30. The professor's composite score is utilized as part of the faculty teaching evaluation process. Instructors can weight the student evaluation scores as 10 to 40% of their yearly evaluation, with the remaining components being self, peer, and chair evaluations. Professors were furnished the opportunity to learn how to interpret the student responses so the composite number does not take on a life of its own. This was accomplished by providing seminars for each department regarding how to interpret survey data so as to tease out relevant features of student responses in light of the discipline, course goals, and course methods.

The survey, while definitely an improvement, is not free of controversy or problems. First, Fassinger (1997) has contended that students' actions are influenced most by the class as a group, not the behavior of the professor. Other researchers point to campus culture (Tsui 2000) or to contending student cultures (Rau and Durand 2000) as the paramount influence for students. The survey does not address these issues. Second, the survey is used as an assessment tool, but the college has made no provisions to teach students how to assess (see Graham 1998). Third, the emphasis on covering content (e.g., question 22) may unfairly lower the composite score of

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a professor who values exploring ideas in depth or stimulating critical thinking (see Kolutich and Dean 1999). Fourth, some would contend students can only effectively assess features that are concrete, like those asked about in questions 28, 29, and 30 (see Williams and Ceci 1997). Fifth, the "halo effect" may impinge on the responses to even concrete questions.

The end-of-semester instrument provides an opportunity to gain insight into the obstacles students must overcome and how students think. It can teach students about

learning, teaching, and leadership. But what about the assessment of the professor? No instrument is neutral and value-free. Also, the process is political. Using the new survey offers some advantages but is not as bureaucratically convenient as the traditional instrument. First, it requires departments to link their values and purpose directly to the instrument. For instance, our institution attacked the issues of student responsibility and concern for maintaining standards. Second, use of multiple methods is necessary to

ascertain teaching competence and effectiveness. Evaluating professors requires understanding the frame of reference and the limitations of each method employed as well as deciding at the very beginning whether to focus on the process or/and outcomes (see Harvey and Knight 1996). Third, institutions must be more aware of the unintended consequences of utilizing a particular survey. Does the survey push faculty and students in the direction that is consistent with the institution's goals and values?

## Appendix Student Opinion Survey of the Learning Experience\*

Please answer the following questions very carefully. Do NOT put your name on this paper. This material will not be viewed by the professor until after final course grades are submitted to the Registrar's Office.

### PART I

1. How many hours have you invested outside of class each week in this course?  
a) 0 b) 1-3 c) 4-6 d) 7-9 e) 10 or more
2. How many times have you conferred with your instructor outside of class during this semester?  
a) 0 b) 1-3 c) 4-6 d) 7-9 e) 10 or more
3. How many times have you sought academic support services (i.e., library, computer labs, instructional support labs, tutors, etc.) for this class during this semester?  
a) 0 b) 1-3 c) 4-6 d) 7-9 e) 10 or more f) not applicable
4. How many credit hours of classes have you enrolled in for this semester?  
a) 1-6 b) 7-11 c) 12-16 d) 17+
5. How many hours per week have you worked this semester (include things such as family obligations and volunteer work)?  
a) 0 b) 1-10 c) 11-20 d) 21-30 e) 31+
6. My GPA is:  
a) 3-4 b) 2-2.9 c) 1.0-1.9 d) below 1.0 e) don't know/unsure/not applicable
7. I expect to have earned a grade of \_\_\_\_ in this class.  
a) A b) B c) C d) D e) F
8. How many hours of class/labs have you missed?  
a) 0 b) 1-2 c) 3-5 d) 6-10 e) 11+

PART II: The following questions will use the following scale:

Strongly agree    Agree    Neither agree nor disagree    Disagree    Strongly disagree    Don't know    NA

9. Regularly, I kept up with the reading assignments and studied my notes.
10. I studied a sufficient amount for this course.
11. I completed and submitted all my assignments.
12. In class I have been an active learner (such as took notes and participated, and/or followed class discussion).
13. I contributed to a positive learning atmosphere in this class.
14. I discussed the subject matter of this class with family, friends, and /or other classmates.
15. If I had a question or didn't understand an assignment, I went to the instructor for clarification.
16. The exams, quizzes, projects, or papers in this class required thinking and understanding.
17. The instructor encouraged me to think for myself.
18. This course required more effort on my part than courses in my educational experience prior to college.
19. This course challenged me to think.
20. I have learned very much about this subject from this course.
21. I learned useful skills (such as problem solving, analytical, written or verbal communications, or social skills) from this course.
22. Generally, this course covered the topics outlined in the syllabus.
23. I learned from the required textbook.
24. I learned from the course assignments (such as labs, papers, homework, group activities).
25. Preparing for the exams, quizzes, and/or papers was very helpful in learning for this subject.
26. Class labs, lectures, and/or activities added to my understanding of the subject.
27. If I needed assistance, the instructor was willing to provide guidance.
28. The instructor arrived on time for class.
29. The instructor usually kept the class for the full class period.
30. The first week of class, the instructor distributed a syllabus that identified assignments and explained class/college policies and procedures (such as prerequisites and the course description).

\*Susan Hines, John Ricks, Vivian Lane, Rebecca Cline, Valerie D'Ortona, Brian Getzin, Art Tyson, and Charles Snare were the committee members who formulated the survey. The faculty at Middle Georgia College approved the instrument and began employing this version in the 1998-99 academic year.

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## Note

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