Providing Feedback to Faculty and Responding to Faculty Concerns about Student Ratings

Administrators and faculty review committees are responsible for providing feedback to the faculty they evaluate. Both groups can experience discomfort about making life-altering decisions that affect other faculty based on student ratings data (though hopefully not solely on those data). The discomfort and fear of SRTEs is exacerbated when faculty make incorrect assumptions about the history of the SRTEs or if they rely on opinion pieces or stories about studies that have not undergone peer-review rather than the significant body of research conducted by student ratings experts.

Administrators have the additional responsibility of providing useful and actionable feedback to guide faculty development, as well as responding in productive ways to faculty complaints or defensiveness. Below are some of the most common questions asked by administrators during or after a feedback meeting with a faculty member.

How do I respond to a faculty member who claims that his/her ratings are invalid because of contradictory student comments?

All faculty members receive written comments that are contradictory, but most faculty do not know this because they only see their own ratings. New faculty can be particularly frustrated or concerned when students’ comments contradict each other. Nearly every faculty member receives contradictory comments. Administrators and faculty who have served on review committees can help other faculty focus on the most frequent ratings and comments.

How do I know whether a faculty member’s ratings are “good” or “bad”?

In general, faculty members are doing well if most of their scores are in the 5-6 range, even if they have some scores that are lower. When looking at a faculty member’s distribution of scores, if most of the ratings are clustered at the higher end of the scale, then the faculty member is doing fine. A faculty member who receives an occasional average of 4 over the course of five years, with most averages between 5 and 7 is probably not having serious problems. However, if a faculty member consistently receives averages of 4 or lower, it most likely indicates an important instructional challenge.

What should I say to faculty member with ratings distributed across low end of the rating scale?

Faculty with many scores in the 1-3 range, or with scores broadly distributed across the entire scale, are typically facing serious challenges with their students. These kinds of distributions need to be addressed as soon as possible because faculty need sufficient time to develop their teaching before coming up for a review or a contract renewal.

Faculty members should also be reassured that even though some faculty seem “born to teach,” nearly all of the behaviors practiced by excellent teachers can be learned. Remind all faculty of the resources available to support instructional development. Penn State has a wealth of resources at the university level, within the colleges, and at the commonwealth campuses. The Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence (http://schreyerinstitute.psu.edu) provides faculty with help interpreting and responding to student ratings as well as workshops and online resources about student ratings and effective teaching. Faculty also have access to local resources. Many of the campuses and colleges have faculty teaching groups and can identify faculty teaching mentors. The Commonwealth Campus has an active network of instructional design specialists, many of whom are
also involved in faculty development. College e-learning units are also excellent sources of information.

Faculty should not be sent to the teaching center only in response to low or problematic student ratings because the center then becomes a punishment rather than a source for information, resources, and support. It is far better to begin talking with faculty immediately upon their arrival on campus about the resources the institution provides to support teaching and learning. This is the best way to ensure that all faculty are successful teachers.

**How do I respond to a faculty member who says that “only faculty who give away As get high SRTEs” or who argues that another faculty member who receives high SRTEs “must be giving away grades?”**

Most faculty members at Penn State receive high student ratings. The university has hundreds of faculty who teach tough courses and who also receive high student ratings. Our students do not equate high standards with poor teaching. Faculty members who try to manipulate students’ ratings by “giving away As” should be advised that they are at risk of receiving low ratings from the students who work hard in the course and who turn in A-level work.

**How do I respond to a faculty member who says that SRTEs are “just a popularity contest” and that they are “not valid?”**

Administrators can take a number of approaches when responding to this kind of comment. First, they can try to explain that the student ratings are the most thoroughly examined topic in higher education, with thousands of studies conducted by researchers in both experimental and empirical contexts. The vast majority of the legitimate research on student ratings indicates that they are more reliable and accurate than any other method of evaluating teaching (McKeachie, 1997). Their validity has been tested more than any other method for evaluating faculty teaching, including peer observation, focus groups, and external review of materials (Berk, 2005, 2013). Unfortunately, this may not be sufficient to change a faculty member’s mind.

When faculty question the validity of students ratings, they are typically not, in fact, talking about the statistical validity or reliability of the ratings instrument, but instead they are concerned whether their ratings will be used against them. This provides an opportunity to talk about many of the issues discussed above.

If neither of these strategies works, be honest that student ratings are unlikely to become obsolete any time soon, no matter what the latest headlines say. Student ratings have been around since the 1920s and were first used at Purdue University, the University of Washington, the University of Texas, and Harvard (Marsh, 1987) and the first research on them was published by Remmers in 1933. The SRTEs provide an effective and systematic way to gather feedback from students enrolled in courses and it is in the faculty member’s best interest to learn how to use these data to benefit his/her teaching and the learning environment for students.

**What should I do when a faculty member argues that something other than their teaching is responsible for lower than expected ratings?**

Sometimes faculty who do not fit students’ perceptions of what a professor should look or act like can experience bias among the students. While biases do exist, such bias rarely, if ever, fully explains the results for a faculty member who consistently receives ratings clustered at the low end of the ratings scale. The research on gender bias has a longer history than does the research on bias due to race, ethnicity, or culture, but the number of studies is increasing. Yet even as these areas of
research continue to expand, the studies do not indicate that gender, race, ethnicity, or culture explains all of the variability in the students’ ratings.

Some faculty suggest that the move to online administration of the SRTEs is responsible for their low ratings. This is generally not supported by the data. SRTE scores continue to cluster at the high end of the scale. In fact, many faculty have experienced a slight increase in their ratings with online administration because students who are disengaged from a course are even less likely to complete the student ratings outside of class. Some individual faculty members may be able to make a case that their ratings changed dramatically before and after the shift to online administration. However, other potential causes should be ruled out before attributing the change to the method of administration, particularly because such changes are relatively rare.

**How do I tell a long serving faculty member who has had poor SRTEs for years that those ratings are no longer acceptable?**

Some administrators avoid having these conversations, which is not fair to the students or the faculty member. This avoidance happens for a variety of reasons including not knowing what kind or ratings are acceptable, not knowing how to approach the faculty, or wanting to avoid hurting the faculty member. While it might have been sufficient in the past to receive these kinds of ratings, students rightly expect more now. Again, the university has invested resources to help faculty take the next steps to improve their teaching.

**How do I respond to faculty who have been told that “teaching doesn’t matter for promotion and tenure?”**

At many universities, it is true that faculty cannot expect to be successful in the P&T process based primarily on excellent teaching. In general, faculty must meet unit requirements for research before the teaching record becomes an issue. However, poor teaching can hurt a tenure and/or promotion case. The bottom line is that in these days of heightened scrutiny of higher education, few faculty members can afford to ignore teaching, not even “star researchers.”

**What do I say to a faculty member who says “My response rates are too low to be included in my dossier?”**

There is no single standardized “ideal” response rate although a number of researchers have made suggestions (Franklin and Theall, 1991; Marsh, 1984; Nulty, 2008; the recommendations of the latter are reproduced by Barre, 2015). Administrators and review committee members should be skeptical that ratings from courses with extremely low response rates are representative. One of the benefits of the decreased response rates associated with online administration of student ratings is that evaluators are less likely to over-interpret the results!

No SRTEs may be excluded from the dossier without making advance arrangements prior to administration of the SRTEs; see the Statement of Practices for the Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness for Promotion and Tenure ([http://www.psu.edu/dept/vprov/pdfs/srte_statement.pdf](http://www.psu.edu/dept/vprov/pdfs/srte_statement.pdf), section 1.A.11.a.2). While this practice has been in place since 1985, very few faculty take advantage of it, and some change their minds after realizing that their ratings did not decrease as expected. When the SRTEs were first administered in 1987, the University Faculty Senate recommended that 2/3s of the students be present in the room, but a minimum response rate of 76% was never required. There is no minimum response rate for the SRTEs.
How do I respond to faculty who say that the lower response rates of the online student ratings system make the ratings “invalid?”

As noted above, the validity of student ratings has been well-established for decades. When some faculty express concerns about validity, they are, upon further discussion, actually concerned about the representativeness of the sample of responding students, not to the statistical validity of the instrument. Average response rates have decreased, as expected, with the transition to online ratings. Many faculty have found success emphasizing how important the feedback is to the improvement of the course and by providing examples of course improvements suggested by past students (see http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/IncreaseSRTERespRate/).

Faculty with low response rates in small enrollment courses may have cause for concern because when the number of respondents is small, a single student’s rating carries a lot of weight. But in general, the lower response rates have typically not had a negative impact on faculty members’ average scores (Linse, 2010). Administrators should be wary of over-interpreting results from small enrollment courses with low response rates.

How do I respond to faculty who argue that the SRTEs should not be used because they were originally meant for improvement, but were co-opted for faculty evaluation.

At Penn State, the SRTEs were specifically enacted by the University Faculty Senate on April 30, 1985 to provide consistent data for the purposes of promotion and tenure and annual review. This contrasts with many other institutions where student ratings were first developed for the purpose of improvement and then were absorbed into the faculty evaluation process.

Faculty members were highly involved in the creation of the SRTEs and included in the process from start to finish. After the Senate passed legislation to enact the process, faculty were asked to propose questions for the new instrument. The 177 questions (http://www.srte.psu.edu/SRTE_Items/) used today are the result of that process.

References Cited


