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Evaluation Vs. Assessment: The Students Perspective on the Student Evaluation Process

By Miriam Solis

This study explores the relationship between the student and the instrument within the larger contexts of evaluation and assessment. The discussion is placed within the current practice of evaluation at CSUMB. And the need to adopt an alternate practice to address student concerns regarding the process.

Introduction

The things that are the closest to us are often those that are overlooked; student evaluations are an excellent example of this. A typical student will spend approximately eight semesters at a four-year college; assuming four courses per semester, that student would have been asked to be an evaluator 32 times upon graduation. The fact is, these evaluations impact careers, policy decisions and ultimately the student's own learning environment. Yet, from the student perspective, how much is known of the process, its purpose, its development and its usefulness?

After a conversation with an advisor, it became apparent that I didn't understand my role, as a student, in the evaluation process. During this particular conversation, I expressed dissatisfaction with one of my professors; my advisor asked whether I had communicated these thoughts in the semester-end student evaluation. I didn't understand why he asked such a question and my reply was filled with anger and frustration, "Hell no, those things are worthless, no one looks at them." I had always believed that expressing my opinion via student evaluations was a waste of time because faculty never bothered to consider or act on my feedback. My advisor strongly urged me to reevaluate my stance on this. From this and subsequent conversations, it was clear that as a faculty member, my

advisor had a very different attitude toward the evaluations than I did as a student.

Framing the Question

Evidently, there seems to be a gap in the perceived value of the student evaluation process, depending on whether one is student or faculty. This study is a look at the nature of this gap and its implications and seeks to uncover what accounts for the difference in the perception of value from the student's perspective. As students are the major actors in the student evaluation process, I am particularly interested in finding out what other students think of the process and whether it benefits them. It seems logical that an increase in beneficial student perception would positively correlate with an increase in the quality of student input. The more students believe that the student evaluations will benefit them; the more likely the quality of participation will increase. As the student evaluations are an integral part of a larger teaching evaluation process, examination of the primary actors (students) in the component student evaluation process is fundamental.

Operating from these assumptions, I set out to explore the perceptions of other students. I knew what I thought about student evaluations, but what were others thinking? After interviewing several students it became apparent that they are very much aware of their role in the student evaluation process, but don't seem to find it

useful or working in anyway to benefit them. This is an ironic development, as the student evaluations were originally intended to benefit the student.

Historical Origins and Transformation of the Student Evaluation

Since its inception in the 1920s, the student evaluation has undergone significant changes. Initially, the evaluations were part of an attempt to assist fellow students in course selection (Braskamp & Ory 1994). This objective held constant from 1930 to 1960, with voluntary faculty participation (Ory, 1991).

According to Ory (1991), students were responsible for the development of the forms, and faculty determined whether to distribute the forms to their classes. A major shift in the governance of the student evaluations took place during the educational struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Because of student demands for faculty accountability, the 1960s witnessed a change from ‘voluntary’ faculty participation to ‘required’ participation (Ory, 1991; Wachtel, 1998). Students were now interested in having this information used in the evaluation of faculty as well as in the selection of courses. Academic administration subsequently agreed to consider low ratings in teaching assignments and in various promotion decisions (Ory, 1991). During this time, the student evaluation mainly served a formative purpose to provide faculty with information to improve teaching. As a result of a more involved faculty, a surge of faculty committees became involved in the development of the forms (Ory, 1991). The emergence of these committees was mainly due to the unreliability perceived by faculty and academic administration on student-developed forms as an accurate means of measuring teaching. As a result of a more

involved faculty, interest increased and much of the 1970s became known as the “golden age of research on student evaluations” (Wachtel, 1998). While student ratings were used for formative purposes in the seventies to improve teaching, the federal cutbacks of the eighties transformed the use of student ratings for administrative purposes (Ory, 1991).

Federally funded agencies were forced to make program and personnel decisions and student ratings became used for summative purposes to judge faculty work. Satisfied with the research outcomes of the 1970s, academic administrators were quick to take advantage of the information already being collected from the student evaluations and use it for their own evaluative needs. The result was that the data became value added and cost savings were realized.

Change in Purpose

Today colleges and universities in the United States use the student evaluation primarily as evidence to assist academic administrators in the evaluation of faculty for purposes of retention, tenure, promotion and merit pay decisions (Arreola, 1995; Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Haskell, 1997; Ory 1991). In fact, according to Arreola (1995), “Student ratings are one of the most common features of faculty evaluation systems”. This practice known as the faculty evaluation system is a part of a “social contract that faculty make with society to justify its trust” (Braskamp & Ory, 1994), and includes a complex process of measuring faculty performance by assessing and evaluating their work.

Keep in mind that the following description of the faculty evaluation system is intended to provide an overview of this complex system. The work of faculty is evaluated under several different categories,

which vary according to institutions, but generally include the areas of teaching, research, and service (Arreola, 1995, Braskamp & Ory, 1994). Each category has a certain weight or value assigned to it by administration according to the institution's objectives (Arreola, 1995). Evidence is collected for two evaluation purposes; a formative purpose designed to provide feedback information for faculty growth and development, and a summative purpose that provides information from which to base personnel decisions such as retention, tenure, promotion, and merit pay (Arreola, 1995). The evaluation of faculty relies on the information [faculty work] that is collected and organized as evidence. This process is known as assessment and utilizes data from a variety of sources in support of faculty performance. These sources include: the faculty member, faculty colleagues, campus administrators, faculty development professionals, and students. The student has a very interesting role that contributes largely to the faculty evaluation system in the assessment of teaching.

At the end of every college semester students are asked to participate in the student evaluations, which gather student perception on teaching effectiveness. These data "are used to tell people who have a serious investment in their profession how well they are performing in at least one part of their job" (Theall & Franklin, 1990). While historically students played a pivotal role in the initiation of the student evaluation, time and shifting priorities have weakened their influential position in the process. These shifting priorities can be seen prominently in the lexicon of student evaluations.

Research Focus on Student Evaluations

Review of the literature indicates a focus on maximizing the value of the student

evaluation in the larger process of the evaluation of faculty. For this reason, the student evaluation has undergone considerable controversy with much attention placed on issues perceived to influence student ratings. One extensive area being researched is the development of the instrument where researchers have been taking a closer look at the purpose, questions, and items included on the form (Arreola, 1995; Kemp & Kumar, 1990). Researchers are in favor of an instrument design that takes into account that effective teaching is multi-faceted, and any measurement should be sensitive to the different aims, qualities and aspects of teaching (Arreola, 1995; Kemp & Kumar, 1990). When discussing the topic of instrument development the focus inevitably turns to the issue of reliability.

This aspect of the research on student evaluation involves determining whether student ratings are consistent both over time, and from rater to rater (Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Kemp & Kumar, 1990). In other words, researchers are concerned with the development of the instrument with the end goal being a student evaluation, generating data that does not substantially deviate over time, a concept known as *reliability*. In Arreola's view (1995), reliability can be separated into two subsets: broadly speaking, stability of student responses, and consistency among responders. Speaking to the ultimate goal of utility maximization the reliability question seems to have been answered. Since researchers have placed so much emphasis on proper instrument development there is very little debate about the reliability factor (Hobson & Talbot, 2001), unfortunately, the opposite is true regarding *validity*.

It seems simple to say, but much debate has centered upon whether the data produced by the instrument actually measures what it intends to: teaching

effectiveness (Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Hobson, & Talbot, 2001; Kemp & Kumar, 1990). This aspect of the research addresses validity of student ratings. Conceptually, the very nature of teaching efficacy contains inherent problems. Educational priorities change, which makes the measurement of teaching effectiveness a fluid affair. Without a concrete definition of teaching effectiveness the question of validity becomes problematic.

Much research has been done on the characteristics that may influence student ratings. While the effect of descriptive variables on reliability is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that the negative repercussions can be minimized by careful attention to instrument development (Arreola, 1995). The most cited variables and areas impacted are listed below in Table 1.

In review, the student evaluation has undergone a major change in purpose from completely formative to primarily summative. This changed prompted a flurry of research activity that focused on the areas of instrument development, reliability, validity and descriptive variables thought to influence student ratings. Another characteristic of past research was that it centered on the mechanics of the instrument. This concentration of the research was inevitable in response to the high stakes associated with using the data for summative purposes. More specifically, this data is used by academic administration for retention, tenure, promotion and merit pay increases. The research associated with the student evaluation process is currently undergoing an evolution in response to the perceived need for increased quality participation by the main actors.

Table 1: Descriptive Variables Thought to Influence Student Ratings

<i>Characteristics Associated w/the Administration of SEs*</i>	<i>Characteristics of the Course</i>	<i>Characteristics of the Instructor</i>	<i>Characteristics of Students</i>
Timing of Evaluation	Electivity	Instructor Rank and Experience	Personality Characteristics
Anonymity of Student Raters	Class Meeting Time	Reputation of Instructor	Prior Subject Interest
Instructor Presence in Classroom	Level of Course	Research Productivity	Gender of Student
State Purpose of Evaluation	Class Size	Personality of the Instructor	Expected Grade and the Leniency Hypothesis
	Subject Area	Seductiveness: The "Dr. Fox" Effect	
	Workload of Course	Gender of Instructor	
*Student Evaluations		Minority Status of Instructor	
		Physical Appearance of Instructor	

Source: Wachtel, H.K. (1998). Student evaluation of college teaching effectiveness.

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Lacking Student Perspective

We are now seeing the emergence of a new body of literature that examines the behaviors and attitudes of students toward the student evaluations. This renewed interest in the student perspective signifies an emerging consciousness as, “few studies have analyzed the factors that influence the students’ attitude toward teaching evaluations and the relative importance of these factors.” (Chen & Hoshower, 1998) Research to this point has focused on the student’s motivation to participate in student evaluations and the relative quality of that participation. In addition, some research is further studying the variables that influence participation quality. As mentioned there is relatively little information published to date; however, I will briefly introduce some of the most relevant studies and illustrate how they provide the foundation for my research.

The work of Chen & Hoshower (1998) use Expectancy Theory to examine how certain factors may influence a student’s motivation to participate in the student evaluations. More specifically the study examines, “the impact of potential uses of teaching evaluations upon students’

motivation to participate in the evaluation process” (Chen & Hoshower, 1998, p534). The research indicates that the success of student evaluation systems is heavily dependent on students’ “active participation and meaningful input.” While this may seem self-evident, there is very little data to suggest that this is happening. Another important facet of this research explores, “whether an inappropriately designed teaching evaluation... hinders students from providing valid or meaningful feedback [and] will affect their motivation to participate in the evaluations” (Chen & Hoshower, 1998, p1). The crux of this study examines how the mechanics of instrument design may provide a potent opportunity to increase the quality and motivation to participate in student evaluations by recognizing that students have unique expected outcomes of the evaluations.

The work of Sojka, Gupta and Deeter-Schmeiz, (2002) examine how students and faculty perceive student evaluations very differently when controlled for specific descriptive variables¹. Specifically, students were found to doubt that student evaluations promoted easier grading by faculty or that they significantly impact faculty careers or teaching styles. In addition, faculty members indicated the belief that students tended to rate more favorably those professors that were perceived to be “easy” or “entertaining”.

Continuing in the vein of placing emphasis on student perception, the work of Spencer and Schmelkin (2002), “explores student perspectives on course and teacher ratings as well as some issues related to teaching effectiveness and faculty roles” (p1). More specifically, the study found that students appeared willing to participate and had no particular fear of repercussions by faculty. However, the student also expressed

¹ See Table 1: Descriptive Variables Thought to Influence Student Ratings

that they did not believe that faculty, “pay attention to the results” or, “even consult the ratings themselves.”

As my project is primarily concerned with the main actor in the student evaluation process, the student, I have relied on the previous works to provide a solid foundation for the construction of my investigation. Because student evaluations have become the vehicle for the creation of data used in high-stakes summative evaluation; it is in the interest of all parties to facilitate increased quality participation by the main actors of the process, the student.

Setting

The California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB), is a small university founded in 1994 and situated on the Monterey Bay Peninsula. CSUMB primarily serves the needs of undergraduate students, offering 12 interdisciplinary majors with a student population of 3551 students as of September 2002. The university prides itself on out-comes based learning, which means that the curriculum design begins with the end in mind and the means to achieve the stated goals or outcomes are then identified and developed. All members of the campus community are evolved in this progression: the academic community identifies *what* will be learned, the professor determines *how* the course will be taught to assist the student in successfully attaining the stated outcomes, and the student outlines *how* he/she intends on reaching these goals through an Individualized Learning Plan.

“This duality of commonality of learning outcomes (what will be learned) and individuality of teaching approaches and learning plans (how it will be learned) best ensures both accountability and

creative empowerment of both teachers and learners.” (CSUMB)

The notion of out-comes based education is paired with learner-centered education, which means that the focus is on the student rather than the professor. This learning philosophy encourages students to “become interpreters of their own learning. When they graduate, the students know what they know and what kind of learners they are.” How does the university learning philosophy measure up to the student evaluation processes?

At the time of this writing, CSUMB has four separate student evaluation instruments with administrative control lying at four autonomous colleges², unlike most campuses, which have a university-wide instrument.

Participants

Students, faculty, staff and administration from different institutes were interviewed during a two-month period (April and May, 2002). Represented in the study are students, faculty, and staff from seven institutes as well as academic administration. While participants from a variety of institutes were contacted, support for this study is primarily based on contributions from the Institute for Human Communications (HCOM) and from the participation of students from the Social and Behavioral Sciences Center (SBSC).

Communication with the participants was primarily done via the First Class Intranet Server, an easy-to-use communication system that allows the CSUMB campus community to send and receive e-mail, share files, use electronic conferencing to exchange ideas, and link to the internet. Interviews, however, were conducted in person at different locations on

² CSUMB Student Evaluations

campus taking approximately 45 minutes. Student interviews were conducted at the University Center, the Black Box Cabaret (BBC), and in one instance, a classroom. All interviews with faculty, staff and academic administration were carried out in their department offices.

Because of their exposure to the evaluation process, students at the junior and senior grade levels were chosen exclusively for the study. Students were first recruited to participate in the study by means of a questionnaire³ that was dispersed twice during the second half of the Spring 2002 semester. The questionnaire was posted on Open Form, a widely visited conference folder that supports on-going discussion between all members of the campus community. The purpose of the questionnaire was twofold - to obtain student perspective on the use and usefulness of the SCE, and to recruit students interested in the topic to participate in individual interviews. As students responded to the questionnaire, they were asked to participate in a thirty-minute individual interview on the topic of student evaluations. Of the 11 students that responded to the questionnaire, six agreed to meet for the individual interview. Unfortunately, this method of recruitment (electronic) did not result in a large pool of participants. As additional participants were needed, I approached colleagues and asked them to canvas for additional participants. This method of recruitment presented a higher result than the questionnaire posted on Open Forum. Therefore, the majority of the students represented in this study were recruited based on the recommendation of another student. As a result, participants were primarily selected from the student body of the Human Communications Institute (HCOM) and the Social and

Behavioral Sciences Center (SBSC). A total of fifteen students participated in an in-person interview.

As faculty members are directly affected by the student evaluations, they are included in the study to understand their interest and perception of the process. More than one faculty member from several institutes was selected from the campus directory and invited to participate in the study. Individuals were sent an email, during the month of May that included a brief description of the study and a request to meet for an in-person interview of approximately 30 minutes. Emails were sent to 14 faculty members and resulted in 5 interviews. Motivation to participate in the study may have been influenced by time constraints during this time of the semester.

When the student evaluations are used as a summative tool in the Retention, Tenure and Promotion (RTP) process, the administration assumes the role of evaluator. As evaluators, administrators are charged with making personnel decisions based on data collected. Therefore, in order to attain a full understanding of the student evaluation process, the perspective of administration is considered in this study. The deans of each center, directors of three institutes, and the Provost were contacted via email and asked to meet for an interview. Two deans and the provost were available for an in-person interview.

The Test of Assumptions

Prior to the interview, students were told of the purpose of the study and informed that the interview would be audio taped. Because of the recording, participants were required to give written consent to participate in the research. The letter of consent⁴ was approved by the Institutional Review Board

³ Recruitment Instrument for Students

⁴ Informed Consent Form of this research

(IRB)⁵ and submitted to the participants for signature. Students did not relay any misgivings about being audio taped and, while there was a mild level of discomfort in the beginning, they quickly warmed up to the environment and forgot about the taping. The interview consisted of five standardized, open-ended questions⁶, and students were also asked to state their major and class rank. During the course of the interview it became obvious that the students had never been formally given an opportunity to express their opinion about the student evaluation process. With tilted heads and furrowed brows they looked at me as if to say, “Are you serious?” Participants often laughed in response to the initial questioning but after they realized that I was serious, they reflected and offered substantive responses. Overall, students projected an air of cynicism that I interpreted as the attitude in which they approach the student evaluations during the end of the semester. Consequently, a large part of my investigation was to explore this perceived lack of enthusiasm.

Following a quick introduction, participants were briefed on the aim of the study. Faculty appeared very welcoming, but reactions to my questions varied from defensive postures to excited and animated gestures. In general, faculty was intrigued by the subject matter and was very willing to participate. The tone of the interview assumed the student-teacher dynamic and faculty responses were generally short and carefully thought out. Judging from the interaction during the interview, this was not the first time that the participants had grappled with the subject of student evaluations. Questions for this group consisted of three standardized, open-ended

questions⁷, and the only identifying information collected was the individuals department. The participant’s answers were articulate and suggested some prior thought. After the initial questing, participants were given an opportunity to add additional comments.

The interview questions for the deans included five standardized questions⁸ and the interview questions for the Provost were modified to included two additional questions. My initial questioning was met with mixed reactions; these ranged from enthusiastic to disconnected to evasive. Largely, this group seemed baffled by my line of questioning and hesitated before answering each question.

Prior to the interviews, I met informally with the Director of Academic Personnel and with the Director of Teaching, Learning and Assessment to obtain information on the policies and procedures of the student evaluations. Because of their unique position of being directly involved with the retention, tenure and promotion, as well as faculty development processes, they became key informants. In preparation for meeting with my key informants, I constructed a student evaluation process map that depicted my understanding of the process⁹ and was expecting to find a similar map in existence. The map was presented to the informants and asked to comment on its accuracy. These meetings concluded that I was misguided in my perception of the student evaluation process and that, in fact, *no such policies and procedures are currently in existence*. Consequently, I became interested in exploring the perception of other students and administrators regarding the student

⁵ CSUMB IRB Case No: 02-44

⁶ Interview Questions Measuring Student Perspective

⁷ Interview Questions Toward Understanding the Faculty Role

⁸ Interview Questions Toward Understanding Academic Administrators Role

⁹ Initial Student Evaluation Process Map

was taken primarily to see if any similarities existed in the level of knowledge between these two important actors.

Table 5: Interview Questions Toward Understanding Academic Administrators Role

Questions1: What do you think are the purposes of the student evaluation?
 Question 2: What would you personally identify as the most attractive outcome of the SE?
 Question 3: What would you personally identify as the least attractive outcome of the SE?
 Question 4: What are the steps from beginning to end, of the Center's role in the SE process?
 Question 5: Do you think student evaluations are useful?
The Provost was ask two additional questions:
 Question 1: What role does the office of the Provost have in the student evaluations?
 Question 2: Do you fell that the present system of student evaluations is well designed and properly implemented?

Findings: Students Perception of Understanding

It is important to note that this study did not set out to gather a statistical representation of the campus community; rather, I intended to collect the perspectives of individuals involved in the planning and administration of the evaluation process. The participants involved in this study have shed light on the shadows of the student evaluation process. The use of inductive reasoning has been put to use in the exploration of the student's perception of the process. In other words, it is important to note that the data reported in this section are the product of interviews and observations that have produced a qualitative body that will be used to draw inferences about a larger and more general phenomena; the student's perception of the student evaluation process.

The first research assumption *The student's knowledge of the student*

evaluation process influences the quality of their participation, was measured by two questions directly related to the student's perceived understanding of the *purpose* and *process* of the student evaluations: "What do you think are the institutional purposes of the student evaluation?"¹⁰ And "What do you think are the steps, from beginning to end, of the student evaluation system?"¹¹. Figure 2 offers insight in to what the fifteen interviewed students believed the *institutional purpose* of the student evaluations were. The most striking point that comes out from the data is that there is no clear consensus with the students on what the purpose of the student evaluations is.

In the Student's Voices...

"To evaluate the professor and have them adjust their teaching styles accordingly [or not], figure out how the class went from the students' perspective, and if the professor is up for tenure they use them."

*"A look at student learning."
 "To judge the teachers conduct, right?"*

"To improve the quality of teaching and the experience of the student here at the university."

"To make sure that the teachers are doing their job effectively when their not being watched over."

Solis, M. Transcriptions of Interviews conducted at CSUMB – April 2002

Pivotal in the development of this study was the exploration of the student's understanding of the *process* of student evaluations. Out of fifteen students interviewed, I received as many perceptions

¹⁰ Question one

¹¹ Question three

of how the student evaluation process works¹². While each one of the students has a different understanding of the process, the majority was able to identify the actors and general informational direction.

That is to say that the majority identified the department, the instructor and the student involvement in the process (see Figure 3), but who/what is involved before and after was not clearly felt, understood, or recalled by students. In fact, the only positive statement that can be made from the data is that all the participants were generally confused as to what happens after they fill out the evaluations¹³. At this point no agreement was found, and it is interesting to note the variety of departments/individuals involvement mentioned by the student, such as; *someone tallies and processes the results, the Dean's office, the Administrative Analyst, the Instructor, the Administration, the Department, the President, the Teaching, Learning and Assessment office, they are filed away, they are discarded*¹⁴.

Students Perception of Benefits

The second assumption, *"The greater students perceive the student evaluations to benefit them the more likely the quality of their participation will increase"*, explores the student's overall attitude toward the process by measuring reactions to questions two and four. According to the student's responses to question number two: (What would you personally identify as the single most important purpose of the student evaluations?) a majority (10 of 15) indicated

that a key ingredient to a beneficial process is for their data to be "taken seriously"¹⁵.

In the Student's Voices...

"See instructor seriously take the course evaluations and improve upon their courses and teaching skill and styles. Really listen to what the students have to saying and take us and our comments into consideration."

"To take student voice into account."

"For both the instructor and department to read it."

Solis, M. Transcriptions of Interviews conducted at CSUMB – April 2002

Another indication of student attitude is uncovered in the responses to question four. When asked if they think the student evaluation is useful,¹⁶ students report a loss of faith in the process. In fact, not one participant believed that the student evaluations were useful as currently practiced; however, many students indicated they believed the evaluations had the potential for usefulness.

In the Student's Voices...

"I think they can be. But sometimes they just pass them out a bad time, like the last five minutes of class and you just want to hurry up and get out of there. I think they have the potential to be very effective."

"I think they could be, but so far I haven't seen anything that would make me believe that they're useful."

¹² Results of Student Interviews, Question Three

¹³ Interview Notes and Report of Findings –Students

¹⁴ Solis, M. Transcriptions of Interviews conducted at CSUMB – April 2002

¹⁵ See Figure 3: Report of Findings-Student Interview Question Three

¹⁶ See Table 1: Interview Questions Measuring Student Perspective/Question Four

“Think they could be. I think that they could be more useful if they were actually implemented.”

Solis, M. Transcriptions of Interviews conducted at CSUMB – April 2002

As previously noted question five was originally intended to explore the link between student evaluations and issues of retention; however, as the study developed it became apparent that the subject of retention was beyond the scope of this research.¹⁷

Faculty

In an effort to address student concerns raised during the interview process, faculty perspective was collected to understand their interaction with the student evaluation. Faculty involved in this study¹⁸ represent a window into this group’s view of the subject, but was by no means exhaustive. Information was collected to address the main concern voiced by the student participants: Is the information being used?

Based on the responses to three questions,¹⁹ generally speaking, faculty depends on formal and informal methods of obtaining student feedback. The informal methods employed by faculty varied from student polls to various classroom assessment techniques. All participants identified the formal method of collecting student feedback to be conducted through semester-end student evaluations. And all but two claim to automatically receive copies of these evaluations, and the majority made some indication of reading, summarizing and analyzing student responses in an effort to make formative

¹⁷ Transcripts and other raw data can be found in Interview Notes & Report of Findings – Students

¹⁸ See Table 1: Profile of Participants

¹⁹ See Table 3: Interview Questions Toward Understanding the Faculty Role

changes. One participant mentioned that a formal analysis from the dean’s office would be helpful. Two out of the five interviewed mentioned that they also use their analysis of the data collected for summative purpose, e.g. trends, patterns, and comparisons from one semester to the next.²⁰

Academic Administration

Toward a better understanding of the student evaluation process, academic administrators were asked to comment on five questions similar to those asked of students.²¹ Representation of this group is small²² and provides this study with a glimpse into the role that academic administration undertakes within the student evaluation process. Further research into the administration’s perspective is warranted and would add to the subject of this study: the student evaluation process.

Based on the information provided by the two deans, administration at this level find the purpose of the student evaluations to be confined to the faculty evaluations system. It is not surprising that both deans would speak to administrative issues, such as “measurement of” and “raises red flags in situation in which instructor is problematic”. Both administrators also alluded to the need for the data collected during student evaluations to be used formatively. There was no agreement on how the process works; however, consensus was reached surrounding the value of the student evaluation, all the participants agreed that they were useful.²³

²⁰ Transcripts and other raw data can be found in Interview Notes & Report of Findings – Faculty

²¹ See Table 5: Interview Questions Toward Understanding Academic Administrators Role

²² See Table 1: Profile of Participants

²³ Transcripts and other raw data can be found in Appendix F: Interview Notes & Report of Findings – Academic Administration.

Analysis

The following section focuses on how the data addresses the initial research assumptions and compares and reflects upon consistencies and inconsistencies of the data gathered in light of the current knowledge of the subject matter.

Considering the Research Assumptions

The student perspective of the student evaluation process was explored under two research assumptions: 1) *The students knowledge of the student evaluation process influences the quality of their participation,* 2) *The greater students perceive the student evaluation process to benefit them more likely the quality of their participation will increase.* This study has uncovered compelling evidence pointing to the conclusion that students at CSUMB do not understand the student evaluation process.

Under the first research assumption the area of *perception of understanding* was explored and the results indicate that students do not understand the purpose or process of the student evaluation. In response to question one; (What do you think are the institutional purposes of the student evaluation?), there was no clear consensus with the students on what the purpose of the student evaluation is. Figure 2 shows seven categorizations of student responses to question one. The multiple responses indicate an uncertainty among the participants as to the institutional purpose of the student evaluations. Question three illustrated further the confusion among students regarding the overall student evaluation process. Participants were asked to identify the steps, from beginning to end, of the student evaluation process. Out of the total population of students queried, fifteen different responses were given which

indicates that students have not had the process explained to them, if in fact there is a process.

The second research assumption explored the student *perception of benefit*. The overall tenor of the data gathered revealed a negative attitude toward the student evaluations. Under this area it was found that students perceive their input is not “taken seriously”. Examples of this can be found in the students own voices as they were asked in question two to identify what they personally identified as the most important purpose of the student evaluations; “*To take student voice into account.*” “*To pay attention to what we are saying and take us and our comments into consideration.*” Another clear indication of the student’s negative perception can be found in claims that they do not find the student evaluation useful. Again, there was consensus in response to question number four as none of the participants found that student course evaluations were useful as currently practiced. Ironically, students want to be taken seriously in a process they don’t find useful. At CSUMB, the student evaluation process seems to be missing key components, which results in students feeling disconnected with a process that relies on their feedback.

Students are primarily concerned with whether the information they are being asked to provide is being used to make changes in the classroom regarding both the course and teaching styles, (as is the claim). The entire faculty interviewed claim to be using this data to enact formative change; however, students don’t seem to believe this. As a result of this disbelief, the students do not see student evaluations benefiting them in any way. Could one of the missing components in the student evaluation process at CSUMB be simply a lack of communication between the primary actors?

The data gathered from administrators interviewed at CSUMB indirectly supported the idea that there may not, in fact, be a formalized process of student evaluations at the campus. This would seem to provide justification of student's confusion with regards to their lack of understanding of the student evaluation process. While it may have been politically imprudent for administrators to verbally express it, statements indicating that the process is not well designed or properly implemented seemed to point to the total lack of a formal student evaluation process.

Considering the Literature: Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with the limited literature found written from the student's perspective. The first correlation between this study and the literature can be found in the work of Chen and Hoshower (1998), which states that student motivation to participate in the evaluation process is primarily driven by the belief that they will be providing vital information.

Chen and Hoshower (1998) determined that students were more motivated to participate in the process if the utilization of their feedback went toward their expected outcome. According to my data, CSUMB students identified that their expected outcome was for their feedback to be taken seriously. In addition, Chen and Hoshower (1998) found that students prefer the student evaluations to be used for teaching improvement. Further, the study revealed that students were least motivated to complete the student evaluation if they believed the data would be used for professor promotions. With this expectation, Chen and Hoshower (1998) conclude that, "if students see no visible results from their

participatory efforts, they will cease to give meaningful input". Analysis of the CSUMB data concludes that students do not believe that their feedback go on to positively effect their learning environment. If we are to believe the analysis done by Chen and Hoshower, then a fundamental element may be missing from the CSUMB student evaluation process. In other words, according to Expectancy Theory, students at CSUMB may not be providing the highest quality data. Of course, this should provide significant cause for alarm for anyone interested in the integrity of the overall process.

In addition, I found that CSUMB student reports are consistent with the findings of Spencer and Schmelkin (2002), who found that students expressed that they did not believe that faculty, "pay attention to the results" or, "even consult the ratings themselves." A close reading indicates that CSUMB students are expressing the same concerns as they hope faculty will:

*"Pay attention to what we are saying and take us and our comments into consideration" and, "Take them into account and make changes accordingly, not just set them aside."*²⁴

While Spencer and Schmelkin (2002), report that students in their study appeared willing to participate and had no particular fear of repercussions by faculty, some CSUMB students were very skeptical about participating because faculty receive copies of the hand written evaluations. This could easily be addressed by having a third party input the information into a database for analysis, as is done in most other universities. While the trust factor on the surface may seem like a minor issue, a closer examination reveals a larger, system-

²⁴ Solis, M. Transcriptions of Interviews conducted at CSUMB – April 2002

wide problem of communication
breakdown.

Figures

Figure 1: General Description of Faculty Evaluation Process

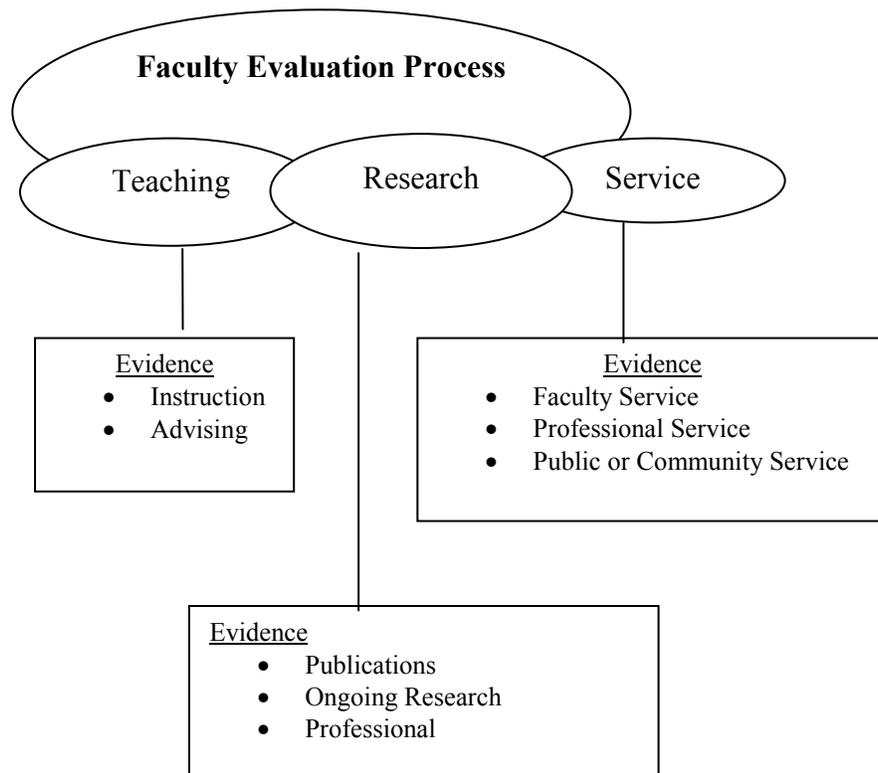


Figure 2: Report of findings

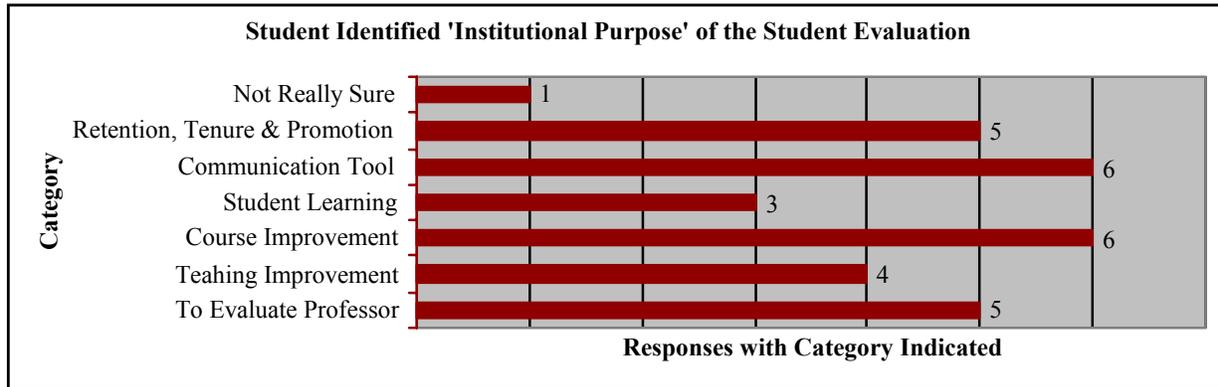


Figure 3: Students General Perception of Process

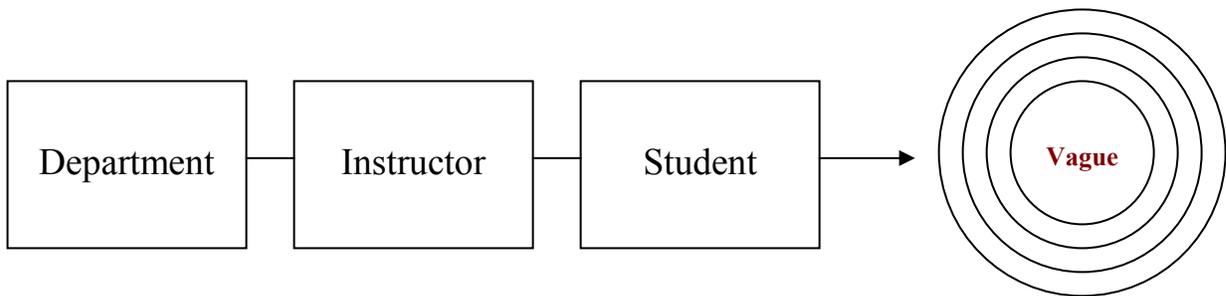


Figure 4: Report of Findings-Student Interview Question Three

