

Recommendations of the Task Force for Course Evaluation Completion (TFCEC)

Task Force Members

Nilanjan Sarkar (chair)
Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Computer Engineering, School of Engineering

Jen Gunderman
Assistant Professor of Musicology, Blair School of Music

Trica Keaton
Associate Professor of African Diaspora Studies, College of Arts & Sciences

Danielle Kitchen
Undergraduate Student, Class of 2018, Human & Organizational Development, Peabody College and Vanderbilt Student Government Representative

Kristopher Preacher
Associate Professor, Psychology & Human Development, Peabody College

Ex Officio: Cynthia Cyrus
Vice Provost of Learning and Residential Affairs

Acknowledgment: Derek Bruff, Director, Center for Teaching

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Summary

The Task Force applauds the work of the Committee to Reevaluate Evaluation (EvalReval), and believes that a campus-wide “buy-in” to the recommendations made in the EvalReval report will benefit all stakeholders in the university community: students, faculty, and administrators. We believe that targeted messages to and education of these communities about the evaluation process are the best way to achieve the highest response rate possible.

Note: the EvalReval report also recommends implementation of a Peer Review/Teaching Portfolio process; however, the charge of the TFCEC was to consider best implementation practices for the student evaluation process only.

Proposal for Implementation of EvalReval Report

Student course evaluations are understood to be a vital part of a university's mission, since they may provide faculty with valuable feedback that can help improve teaching methods, are used in promotion and tenure processes, and give students an opportunity to share their perspectives with their faculty (and, in some cases, other students) without fear of negative consequences. However, completion rates of student evaluations have dropped precipitously at universities all over the country, including Vanderbilt University, where the average response rate was only 58% in 2015. The decline began when universities began to transition from traditional in-class, pencil-on-paper evaluations to online systems. Lower completion rates tend to reflect polarized points of view; that is, if only very assertive students seek out and complete the course evaluation, they probably either loved or hated the class, and the deterioration of more nuanced points of view has led to a negative feedback loop where fewer faculty and students engage with the process at all.

Vanderbilt's Committee to Reevaluate Evaluations (EvalReval) was created to take action to interrupt and reverse this trend. It should be noted that other universities are grappling with the same issue and in some cases have decided to either do away with student evaluations completely, or to offer various incentives to students who complete the forms. Vanderbilt has decided that neither of these options is appropriate for our campus.

The TFCEC reviewed the analysis and recommendations of the EvalReval Committee. We applaud the Committee for their thoughtful exposition of the problem, synthesis of research on course evaluations and peer review of teaching, and development of a new course evaluation system with features that are both common across departments and yet adaptable to specific departments' needs. We concur with all of the EvalReval Committee's recommendations. Specific recommendations included:

- Allotting class time for students to complete their evaluations
- Educating students and faculty about the teaching evaluation process
- Revising the structure of the current course evaluation form to better respond to a variety of teaching/learning environments

The charge of the TFCEC, convened in Spring 2016, was "To identify strategies to assist with completion rates, and to develop implementation plan(s) and a timeline that could synchronize with an anticipated roll-out of new course evaluation questions and technology during Fall 2016." One major barrier to completion rates seems to be that many Vanderbilt students do not appear to know or care what the course evaluation system is. Education of students about the process is a primary goal of the TFCEC, but we believe that messages targeted to faculty and the broader university community are important as well. All parties must "buy-in" to the new evaluation system in order for it to work as intended.

We anticipate that the proposed revised structure and delivery system of the new course evaluations (i.e., being able to complete them on mobile devices, and the elimination of ambiguous language on the form) will increase student participation in the process, even if nothing else is done. However, we hope to build on the assumed positive momentum and recommend the following:

Emails about the importance of the course evaluation system should be sent to students by both administration and Vanderbilt Student Government (VSG), once before the evaluation period starts, and again during the open period, as a reminder in case professors have not taken time during class for student completion of the evaluations. These emails should explain that

- Student evaluations are used in tenure, contract renewal, promotion, and other important processes in a faculty member's career
- Faculty do not see results before grades are submitted
- It is the effectiveness of the teaching and not the likeability of the faculty member which is being evaluated

In addition to this general information given to students about the course evaluation process, the TFCEC recommends the following for specific parties involved:

- Faculty communicating to students (see Appendix 1)
 - Time should be allotted during class for the course evaluation completion.
- Administration communicating to faculty (see Appendix 2)
 - Email should be sent to faculty before the beginning of Fall 2016 semester, or perhaps at the end of Spring 2016 semester, that the system will be changing, and/or a reminder email should be sent just prior to the evaluation window opening.
 - The email should be reinforced by a MyVU article with a link to the full EvalReval report
- Administration communicating to students (see Appendix 3)
 - An email should be sent a few days prior to the evaluation window opening
 - The email should be reinforced by a Hustler article released around the same time (The Hustler has already asked for an interview on this subject, so it is likely this press will happen earlier than we expected.)
- VSG and VUceptors communicating to fellow students (see Appendix 4)
 - A segment about course evaluations should appear during Vanderbilt Visions each year.
 - An email from VSG to students should be sent right before the evaluation period begins.

Blackboard & VOICE were explored as options for automated reminders to students about course evaluations; in both cases, the custom website development required was deemed impractical for our current proposed timeline, but may be implemented in the future, possibly as early as next year.

Suggested Timeline

End of Spring 2016 semester

- Email from administration to faculty regarding the changes which will be implemented for fall semester
- Corollary article in MyVU with link to EvalReval report
- Hustler article

Early Fall 2016

- Visions segment on course evaluation

Fall 2016 – immediately before evaluation window begins

- Email from VSG to students
- Email from administration to students
- Reminder email from administration to faculty

Fall 2016 – during evaluation window

- Reminder banner on YES during evaluation window
- Reminder emails to students from VSG and/or administration
- Faculty speak to students directly during class during evaluation window

Conclusion

We believe that implementing the suggestions above will build upon anticipated positive momentum coming out of the new course evaluation structure and delivery system. Buy-in on the part of students, faculty, and administration is critical, and we hope that all parties will be convinced that higher completion rates are in the best interests of everyone in the university community. This is the first iteration of suggested improvements, and will require feedback, refining, and follow-up, as new data emerge.

Appendix 1: Suggested Talking Points/Protocol for Faculty with Students about Course Evaluations

To motivate students to complete the end-of-course evaluations and to provide useful feedback through those evaluations, we recommend faculty talk with their students about their importance and how those evaluations are used. We do not recommend providing material or grade-related incentive to encourage students to complete course evaluations (e.g., treats, prizes, or extra points, etc.). Instead, we believe that explaining the process, its importance, and its ramifications will encourage broad participation and quality feedback. The following talking points are suggested to facilitate that purpose:

- Remind students that evaluations are designed to be completely anonymous and that you will NOT be able to see any of their evaluations until after final grades have been submitted. Many students do not often realize these basic facts.
- Tell your students that you value their honest, thoughtful, and constructive feedback. Share with them that you read all their comments and use student feedback to enhance and/or improve your courses and teaching methods.
- Reinforce the above with a personalized plea for an honest and thoughtful evaluation. Share personal examples of how you have changed your courses as a result of student feedback. This latter point illustrates to students that their feedback is valuable, beneficial to future students, and helpful in terms of your teaching methods.
- Reinforce that the primary audience for their feedback is the instructor, but that others—department heads and university administrators—will potentially read their evaluations because student feedback is taken seriously, and that course evaluations play a role in faculty renewal, tenure, and promotion.
- Acknowledge that students might not have a lot of experience giving feedback, particularly on teaching. Direct students to the kinds of feedback that instructors tend to find useful. Studies have shown the following qualities of effective feedback:¹
 1. Feedback is not the art of finding fault with someone/something, but rather the act of providing constructive comments about the course, instructor, and instruction methodologies. Feedback should tell the instructor about the

¹Researchers note that “one possible solution to the problem of desultory [or unconstructive] student feedback is to take the time in class to teach students how to give feedback. According to the literature on learning, one of the best ways to learn a skill (and giving feedback is a skill) is to observe a model.” Per the following studies, the examples cited represent some qualities of effective feedback that could be reinforced/shared with students: Bandura, A. *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986; cited in Svinicki, M. “Encouraging Your Students to Give Feedback.” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2001, 87, 17-24, p. 20.

elements that helped learning so that she/he can keep them in the next iteration and the aspects that can possibly be improved with potential solutions.

2. Feedback should be specific (not vague) and buttressed by clear examples. Drawing from previous course evaluations could be helpful/informative.
3. Feedback should focus on observable behavior rather than inference of what someone might be thinking or appear to believe. For example, "The instructor provided important feedback on my assignments." vs "The instructor is unfair."
4. Feedback should avoid personalization or emotionally charged wording (i.e., *The instructor is worthless or milquetoast.*) and stick to descriptions of actual incidents.
5. Feedback should offer alternatives to the behavior criticized.

Appendix 2: Suggested Talking Points/Protocol for Administrators with Faculty about the Importance of Course Evaluation Completion

To foster and revisit the importance of end-of-course evaluations and motivate instructors to encourage students' participation in the evaluation process, the following is recommended:

- Explain briefly the charge/thoughtful work and key findings of the EvalReval committee, as instructors may not know the magnitude of the issue: low student completion rates of course evaluations and their impact. Possibly provide a link to the final report and/or its executive summary for instructors to reinforce the significance of this reboot.
- Acknowledge that low completion rates tend to highlight the ends of the spectrum among students (i.e., "hated it", "loved it,"), which offers little insightful information, disengages instructor participation, and thereby drives down/lowers completion rates.
- Appeal to faculty's self-interest by reminding them of the importance of course evaluations for their tenure and promotion. Remind them of the considerable value placed on a richer set of student perspectives and the benefits gained from student feedback, which will eventually lead to improved teaching methods and instruction.
- Remind faculty that VU is returning to a policy of completing student evaluation in-class to generate a higher student response rate. Reinforce the relevancy of environment and its capacity to inspire serious student engagement with the task and more constructive student feedback. To this end, share that it is also in an instructor's best interest to set aside class time in a setting where they can minimize external distractions. In particular, reinforce that (a) taking class time for course evaluations communicates to students the importance of evaluations to the teaching enterprise, and (b) omitting 10-20 minutes of lecture or discussion during the last weeks of classes is something of a sacrifice, but it's worth doing, given the value of student feedback to improving our teaching over time.
- Acknowledge faculty reservations about such evaluations, such as race, gender, and likeability biases, but remind them that students will be provided informed instruction about how to offer constructive feedback and that instructors are also encouraged to do likewise in their courses.
- E-mail instructors about these and other relevant concerns before the new evaluation system is rolled out.

It may prove helpful to include the following peer testimonial, provided by Derek Bruff (Director, Center for Teaching), as reinforcement:

Vanderbilt's Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey, Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, was [interviewed](#) in 2003 about student course evaluations. She was asked if she thought her students took course evaluations seriously. Her answer:

Yes, I do think my students take [course evaluations] very seriously. I think they do in part because I tell them that I take them seriously. I schedule a time when we'll do the evaluation form; I tell students in advance that I consider it to very important, and tell them that I really want them all to be present to evaluate the course. I tell them that I read every comment and find the comments extremely useful in thinking about and improving my own teaching. When I give the evaluations forms out I repeat all of those things, and add, "You can never write too much; I value all of the feedback I get, I do read it, and it is very important to me." And then, I follow all of the university guidelines (like getting quickly out of the classroom after identifying who's going to collect and return them to the department office.)

So yes, I get very substantive feedback, which I really value. In many courses, perhaps especially large ones, there is likely to be at least someone who's not particularly happy with the course. Their feedback can be very, very helpful to think about what I might do differently in the course. I think emphasizing that we take student comments very seriously, and find them very helpful, simply increases the likelihood of getting very useful feedback from all students.

Appendix 3: Suggested Talking Points/Protocol for Administrators to Students about the Importance of Course Evaluation Completion

1. We have upgraded our course review system, known as VOICE, and our new system is totally mobile-friendly. With our new app, you can now log-in on your phones, tablets, and/or other devices to complete your course review.
2. Your responses are kept totally anonymous, and your instructors receive your feedback only after final grades have been submitted.
3. If more than 50% of the students in a class complete the course evaluation, the outcome is made available to all students. This way, you are providing important feedback for your peers to help them choose future courses, and for your instructors to enhance their teaching methods. Also note that written comments on course evaluations are not shared with other students—those are kept confidential to the instructor and relevant administrators.

Instructors may want to set aside 10-20 minutes during a class session before final exams for you to complete the course evaluation. Student responses are taken seriously, and they help us review professors for tenure and promotion as well as improve the courses that we offer. Real change starts with you – our students. Your voice matters! Thank you for your time, and we look forward to reading your course evaluations.

Appendix 4: Suggested Talking Points for Peers to Foster Course Evaluation Completion

To foster greater awareness among undergraduate students about the importance of completing course evaluation, providing constructive feedback, and explaining how such evaluations are used by instructors and administrators, the following guidelines are recommended for peer-instructors when communicating with fellow students (i.e., Visions, VUceptors, VSG PR point people & representatives, Presidents/Officers of student organizations, etc.). The Center for Teaching is available to facilitate sessions to help peer-instructors learn how to talk with other students about providing feedback on teaching.

The purpose of these guidelines is to motivate students to take course evaluations seriously and to convey the importance of constructive feedback when filling them out. By explaining to students why it is important that they complete these evaluations, we believe they will understand their value and be more inclined to participate in this process each semester. These guidelines can be used to justify why doing so matters and are adaptable. Please feel free to add your own personal story or examples.

- All responses on this survey are completely anonymous. Instructors cannot see their evaluations until after final grades are submitted.
- Honest and constructive feedback is important because it allows instructors, the primary audience of the feedback, to alter and improve their curriculum or teaching methods and adapt them to students' needs.
- Completing end-of-course evaluation is an important way to have their voices heard and plays a huge role in fostering positive change at Vanderbilt for peers and instructors.

Please make a personal plea to the students about how seriously these evaluations are taken by instructors and affect instructors' reappointment, tenure, and promotion.

Include some examples of what a constructive or positive end-of-course review looks like. Remind the students that feedback should and can be very positive, but if students believe that certain changes are needed, encourage them to offer constructive feedback/comments—useful advice that is intended to help or improve something—and explain what changes or solutions would engender that change. Here are some examples if you need guidance:

- Constructive: The lectures were clearly well prepared and interesting, but I think our class would have benefitted from a more discussion-based class session. I think it would foster more class collaboration and would be a good way to stimulate class interest and motivate students to do the reading so they can be active participants in the class discussion.

- Constructive: Though I really enjoyed the class, I believe it was a little too reading-intensive. It was hard to take in such a dense amount of material. Students in the future may benefit if the reading was condensed into smaller bits that are more manageable.
- Constructive: The textbook was interesting, but I believe another textbook would be more beneficial for this class. It was hard to connect the reading to the class sessions, which made it difficult to want to read the assigned text prior to class sessions.
- Positive: This professor was always well prepared for class and was very receptive to student feedback. He/she was very accessible and responsive to my questions in class and via email. The papers and assigned readings were very manageable if one planned ahead, and were very good at taking what we learned in class and applying it to the real world. The second major assignment was particularly relevant to me, since I was able to select a topic of personal interest. Great class and great professor – would recommend to any student.
- Unhelpful: Hated the class!