

Notes on the IDEA Evaluation Instrument

Stephen H. Daniel, Professor of Philosophy

The IDEA Center system of student ratings of instruction provides instructors with feedback on how best to help students achieve learning objectives. It scores faculty performance only on objectives that faculty specify as essential or important in their individual courses, and it automatically adjusts those scores to account for factors beyond the instructor's control (e.g., student motivation, class size, course difficulty). It also supplies comparative reports based on local, disciplinary, and national data, and provides suggestions for improving teaching methods. The evaluation process has three steps:

1. Faculty members fill out a "Faculty Information Form" (FIF) for each class to be evaluated. On the FIF the instructor selects three to five objectives (out of 12) as Essential or Important for the course (preferably no more than two Essential). Essential objectives are weighted twice as much as Important objectives. In selecting objectives, faculty should ask themselves what they do specifically to help students accomplish those objectives and whether progress on the objective influences grades. Objectives should be linked in the course syllabus to learning outcomes. Be sure to mark objectives that have minor or no importance as such, because any unmarked objective is considered Important by default; that will definitely lower the instructor's score. The learning objectives are:
 - a. Gaining factual knowledge (terminology, classifications, methods, trends)
 - b. Learning fundamental principles, generalizations, or theories
 - c. Learning to apply course material (to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions)
 - d. Developing specific skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course
 - e. Acquiring skills in working with others as a member of a team
 - f. Developing creative capacities (writing, inventing, designing, performing in art, music, etc.)
 - g. Gaining a broader understanding and appreciation of intellectual/cultural activity (music, science, literature, etc.)
 - h. Developing skill in expressing oneself orally or in writing
 - i. Learning how to find and use resources for answering questions or solving problems
 - j. Developing a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, personal values
 - k. Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view
 - l. Acquiring an interest in learning more by asking questions and seeking answers
2. During the evaluation period, students are encouraged in class and online (e.g., repeated emails and social media) to fill out the survey because faculty and the University are genuinely interested in enhancing teaching. Some faculty might choose to stick with a paper in-class version, no doubt because that is the way we have administered the PICA forms in the past and because the student response rate to the online administration of the PICA forms has not been as high as in-class administration. You should, however, go to the online format and do what is necessary to change the culture surrounding evaluations to improve the online student response rate because:
 - the IDEA student response instrument is not simply a replacement of the PICA forms but a reorientation of how we think about getting feedback about our teaching. To get more students to respond online, we have to make a strong case to them that we are interested in their responses, and that means follow-up reminders throughout the survey period. We have to change our message from a grudging "the University requires us to do these evaluations" which won't make that much difference in how we teach to "we are genuinely interested in using your feedback to enhance our teaching."

- even though the online response rate in PICA evaluations has been lower than in-class responses, that is due to the fact that in class we have a captive audience rather than a motivated one. By shifting to the online version, we begin as well to shift the attitude of our students (and faculty) from thinking of student responses as a necessary evil to something positively contributing to our professional development.
 - the [IDEA Center's research on paper vs. online survey delivery](#) indicates that even though the response rate for paper surveys is 81% vs. 67% for online, there are no meaningful differences in student ratings. In [research published in 2013](#), the IDEA Center found that online response rates can be improved when faculty encourage student responses by:
 - listing IDEA objectives along with specific course objectives on the syllabus and informing students on the first day of class and throughout the course about how your instructional decisions are informed by the learning goals
 - telling students that, in completing the survey, they will affect how you teach
 - assuring students that their responses are confidential
 - using Facebook or Twitter (or Howdy) to remind students to complete their surveys; this should be done every three days. (Using a mail-merge program, send targeted messages to students using their first names; link to <https://moses.tamu.edu/idea>.)
 - having students fill out the survey in class on their laptops or mobile devices
 - making sure that student email addresses or IDs are accurate
 - during the survey, response rates are reported to faculty by Data and Research Services.
3. Shortly after grades are turned in, faculty receive reports about the evaluations that include:
- a. a summary of teaching effectiveness: the average of the score regarding relevant objectives (50%) and the overall ratings of teacher (25%) and course (25%); adjusted averages and comparisons to the IDEA database are also provided
 - b. student ratings of how well the selected objectives were achieved (compared to IDEA overall and discipline databases); student assessment of course difficulty and their efforts
 - c. suggestions for improving teaching effectiveness, indicating how specific teaching methods are related to learning objectives. For example, research indicates that students rate teachers and courses highly when the teacher:
 - i. explains material clearly and concisely and shows how each topic fits into the course
 - ii. displays a personal interest in students and their learning and finds ways to help students answers their own questions
 - iii. introduces stimulating ideas about the subject and demonstrates the importance and significance of the subject matter

Other documented correlations of teaching methods and teaching effectiveness include: scheduling coursework in ways that encourage students to stay up to date on their work; stimulating students to intellectual effort beyond what most courses require; inspiring students to achieve goals that challenge them; explaining the reasons for criticisms of students' performances; giving tests and assignments that cover the most important points of the course; providing timely and frequent feedback on tests and assignments to help students improve; and encouraging student-faculty interaction outside of class (e.g., office visits, email, etc.).

- d. a statistical summary of student responses to the questions of the evaluation form
- e. a summary of students' written comments