

Example of a Research Plan

I. Title: A Study of Student Course Evaluation Data at a Public University

II. Investigators

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III. Hypothesis, Research Questions, or Goals of the Project

The overarching goal of the project is to determine what factors influence the collection, outcomes, and change over time of Course-Instructor Survey (CIS) ratings. The research questions to be addressed are:

- 1) What is the average response rate across campus?
- 2) Who is not filling out the CIS form by professor rank, course size, college of course, required vs. elective, lab vs. lecture, and semester?
- 3) What mediates overall course grade with overall instructor held constant?
- 4) Does lecturer faculty receive higher responses than other faculty positions?
- 5) How are course workload, probable grade in the course, and overall course rating related?
- 6) Are there changes over time in course and course instructor ratings (tenured and non-tenured)?
- 7) Does course length influence CIS scores?

IV. Background and Significance

The collection and use of student course and instructor ratings in end-of-course evaluations is a wide-spread practice. Many studies have been conducted on this topic, identifying variables that influence the outcome of student course and instructor ratings unrelated to teaching effectiveness (Heckert *et al*, 2006; McPherson, 2006). Previous research reveals mostly consistent findings that course level, workload, expected grade course size, academic major, gender of instructor, instructor rank, and years of teaching experience influence course instructor and course ratings by students. Specifically, most studies agree that higher expected grades lead to higher course and instructor ratings (Kemp and Kumar, 1990; McPherson, 2006; Steiner *et al*, 2006). Courses with higher workloads are usually ranked lower, unless they are higher level courses within a discipline (Cashin, 1992; Heckert *et al*, 2006).

Although these variables have been explored, little has been discovered or directly investigated concerning course and instructor average response rates and what factors influence the likelihood of completing course and instructor surveys. Furthermore, course and instructor rating improvement over time and course length has also not been investigated.

According to McPherson (2006), although attempts to isolate variables to better understand ratings have been attempted many times, many of the findings are flawed due to lack of data and effective statistical methods.

References:

- Cashin, W E. (1992). Student Ratings: The Need for Comparative Data." *Instructional Evaluation and Faculty Development*, 12(2), 1-6.
- Kemp, B., Kumar, G. (1990), "Student evaluations: are we using them correctly?", *Journal of Education for Business*, Vol. 66 No.2, pp.106-11.
- Heckert, T. M., Latier, A., Ringwald-Burton, A., & Drazen, C. (2006, Spring). Relations Among Student Effort, Perceived Class Difficulty Appropriateness, and Student Evaluations of Teaching: Is it Possible to "Buy" Better Evaluations Through Lenient Grading? *College Student Journal*, 40(3), 588-596.
- McPherson, M. A. (2006, Winter). Determinants of How Students Evaluate Teachers. *The Journal of Economic Education*, 37(1), 3-20. Retrieved September 9, 2006, from The H.W. Wilson Company/WilsonWeb Web site: http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results_single_ftPES.jhtml
- Steiner, S., Holley, L. C., Gerdes, H., Campbell, H.E. (2006). Evaluating teaching: Listening to students while acknowledging bias. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 42(2), 355-76.

V. Research Method, Design and Statistical Analysis

All courses that have CIS results in from Fall 2003, Fall 2004, Fall 2005, Spring 2006, and Summer 2006 will be included in the analysis.

The first and second research questions will be analyzed by comparing those that were eligible to fill out the CIS form and those that actually did fill out the form. The third through seventh research questions require will be analyzed using quantitative analysis techniques using the CIS data acquired.

VI. Human Subjects Interaction

A. Sources of Potential Participants

Participants will be included in the study if they were faculty or students who completed a Course-Instructor Survey for the courses during Fall 2003, Fall 2004, Fall 2005, Spring 2006, and Summer 2006 at UT Austin. It is anticipated that most student and faculty will fall in the undergraduate and graduate population age range of 18-75 years. Individual student responses are averaged within the data set for each item.

B. Recruitment of the Participants

Secondary data is being used in this study and therefore participants will not be recruited.

C. Informed consent

An informed consent waiver has been requested in that secondary survey data is being used and was collected anonymously.

D. Research Protocol

All faculty at the University of Texas at Austin are requested to administer a form of the Course-Instructor Survey to the students in their courses. These surveys are completely anonymous in that students do not provide any personally identifying information.

All student and faculty survey data, including course identification and unique numbers, will be requested and collected from programmers within the Instructional Technology Integration & Development section under the Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment. The data requests include-

- CIS record
- year and semester of the course
- instructor name and ID
- academic department and rank of instructor
- course ID and unique number
- class record ID
- any course code pertaining to a course and its discussion groups
- department account code
- level of course (upper division/lower division, graduate/non-graduate)
- course meeting days and times
- whether the course was individually or collectively taught
- summer semester code
- 12th and 21st and last day enrollment counts
- number of students eligible for grades and credit
- number of grades and grades given
- type of CIS (electronic or paper)
- survey code
- number of requested forms
- number of returned forms
- CIS organization code
- scanning times of each CIS survey
- question ID
- option number of response under a question
- frequency of the times an option was chosen

VII. Potential Risks

The loss of confidentiality does not exist. All classes and professors will be identified by their respective unique and ID numbers. To further reduce the risk of confidentiality and identification, data will be stored on a secure network server. Additionally, only aggregate data will be reported.

VIII. Potential Benefits

This research will provide a better understanding of what influences student course and instructor ratings. Furthermore, it will broaden our knowledge of how these ratings are used by instructors. This study will also bring to light those who are less likely to fill out CIS forms. The results will help determine how to interpret ratings in the future, improve student evaluation collection methods, and improve student learning.

IX. Additional documents

Appendix A

The University of Texas at Austin Course-Instructor Survey - Basic Form

The major objective of this survey is to aid in improving teaching effectiveness. Your responses provide valuable feedback to instructors, administrators, and other students. The results are used by administrators to make promotion and salary decisions, and responses to some of the items are also made available on the Web for students to use in selecting classes. Your responses to the questions are extremely important, so please respond honestly and fairly. Consider the semester as a whole and try not to focus on isolated incidents.

Instructions:

Please complete this form using a #2 pencil.
Complete the course information in the box to the right.
Make sure your marks are complete.
Make sure any erasures are complete.

Instructor's Name:
Course Abbreviation and Number:
Course Unique Number:
Semester and Year:

Questions 1-6 use the same response scale.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The course was well organized.					
2. The instructor communicated information effectively.					
3. The instructor showed interest in the progress of students.					
4. The tests/assignments were usually graded and returned promptly.					
5. The instructor made me feel free to ask questions, disagree, and express my ideas.					
6. At this point in time, I feel that this course will be (or has already been) of value to me.					

For questions 7-11, choose the appropriate response from those given for each question.

Overall, this instructor was	Very unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Neutral	Very good	Excellent
Overall, this course was	Very unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Neutral	Very good	Excellent
In my opinion, the workload in this course was	Excessive	High	Average	Light	Insufficient
My overall G.P.A. to date at UT is	Less than 2.00	2.00-2.49	2.50-2.99	3.00-3.49	3.50-4.00
My probable grade to date in this course is	A	B	C	D	F

Optional questions provided by instructor

1. A B C D E
2. A B C D E
3. A B C D E
4. A B C D E
5. A B C D E

Comments

In many ways your written comments can be the most important part of your evaluation of the course and instructor. In the space provided, please indicate what aspects of the course content and instruction were best, how the instructor could improve his or her teaching, and how the content of the course might be improved. The instructor will receive this form after the semester is over.

You may continue comments on the other side.