Student Perceptions of Teaching Evaluations

Linda Ann Carson Lander University 320 Stanley Avenue Greenwood, SC 29649
Meredith Uttley Lander University 320 Stanley Avenue Greenwood, SC 29649
Yvonne Combs Lander University 320 Stanley Avenue Greenwood, SC 29649

ABSTRACT

Most research on student evaluations of teaching have focused on the results and validity of the instrument. Very little exists on student attitudes toward the process. The goal of this study was to assess student's seriousness and perceptions regarding the student evaluation of teaching process and use of results. A vast majority of students stated that they approached the evaluation process seriously. There were no significant differences between students from the two departments in our college. Surprisingly, more students believed that faculty took the evaluation process more seriously than did the administration. We found two significant differences. Females stated that they took the process more seriously than did males. They were also more likely to believe that the evaluations provided good feedback to the administration.

INTRODUCTION

Accountability is increasing in all levels of academia from the accreditation of the institution to student evaluations of their professors; faculty evaluations of their chairs, deans, and the president of the institution. Students are currently being referred to as consumers (Gursoy and Umbreit 2005) and are being given the power that other types of consumers have when dealing with all types of suppliers (Read, Rama and Raghunandan 2001; Haskell 1997). Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) were originally designed to help instructors improve the quality of their instruction and courses, a formative function (Birnbaum 1999; Germain 2005; Haskell 1997; Rifkin 1995). SETs continue to provide formative feedback for instructors (Aultman 2006), but increasingly they are used by administrators for faculty reappointment, tenure, promotion, and pay increase recommendations, a summative function (Cashin and Downey 1992; Jackson et al. 1999; Pike 1998; Seldin 1999; Read, Rama and Raghunandan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, and et al. 2007). Student evaluation forms may be designed by individual instructors, by departments, by colleges, or by outside agencies. Regardless of the instrument used, research, in the past, has supported the assumption that students make valid and reliable estimates of their learning (Hoyt and Perera 2000; Cashin 1995; Seldin 1993). SETs should be highly influenced by variables demonstrated to be strongly associated with effective teaching. Unfortunately, researchers have reached no consensus on a definition of quality or effective teaching (Onwuegbuzie, et.al. 2007; Germain, and Scandura 2005; Okpala and Ellis 2005: Marsh 2001; Jackson, et al 1999; Clayson and Haley 1990). Researchers have also addressed student perceptions related to characteristics of effective teaching (Onwuegubzie et al. 2007; Surrant and Desselle 2007; Marsh 2001), dimensions of student perceptions of teaching effectiveness (Jackson et al. 1999), and student perceptions of learning (Gursoy and Umbreit 2005).

Past researchers have shown that SETs are multidimensional and ratings are impacted by a number of external factors, beyond the control of any instructor (Johnson 2002; Read , Rama and Raghunandan 2001; Chasin 1995). There are three dimension clusters that appear consistently in SETs: "(a) instructor presentation of material, (b) facilitation of learning and (c) regulation of learning" (Jackson, et al. 1999). Various other researchers have accepted and used these dimension clusters when developing or testing SETs to assist in producing the multidimensional aspect of the rating system (Onweugbuzie et al 2007; Marsh 2001). Researchers have identified various additional dimensions that impact SET results. Student mood (Munz and Fallert 1998) was correlated with both instructor and course ratings, as were characteristics of an instructor's personality (Nerger et al. 2007; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007; Clayson and

Sheffet 2006; Okpapa and Ellis 2005; Clayson 1999; Clayson and Haley 1990). Students value, and thus give higher ratings to positive personality traits they define as caring for students, enthusiasm, fairness related to grading, and accessibility (Surratt and Desselle 2007; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007; Clayson and Sheffet 2006; Okpapa and Ellis 2005; Gursoy and Umbreit 2005; Jackson et al 1999; Hinkin 1991; Clayson and Haley 1990). However, Cashin (1995), states the instructor's personality "is not related to student ratings".

Researchers have attempted to clarify faculty assumptions regarding the impact on SETs from class size, class time, whether the class was required or an elective, the workload (required assignments and preparation for the class), and grading leniency. The effects of class size have been the focus for Uttley and Carson (2007), Maurer et al. (2006), Shurden et al. (2005), Kwan (1999), and Fernandez, Mateo and Muniz (1998), but have shown mixed results (UCSB 2004). Uttley and Carson (2007), Cashin (1995), and Hinkin (1991) studied the effects of class length, and time of day for the course, again finding mixed results.

Gursoy and Umbreit (2005) and Marsh (2001) explored definitions of good and bad workloads assigned to students. Students define workloads by the amount of time they spend on productive, valuable activities related to the course. The myth is that less workload for students leads to higher student ratings. Gursoy and Umbreit (2005) and Marsh (2001) found that students valued, thus giving positive ratings, for a high good workload and negative ratings for a high bad workload (activities that student's did not believe were productive for learning in the course). Of course, there is a point where too much good workload was just too much, thus lowing the rating. However, this point is never identified within the research, possibly because it varies by student. Cashin (1995) suggests that evaluations based on workloads support the validly of student ratings, but Cashin does not distinguish between "good or bad" workloads. Nor does he address the myth of workloads. Lenient grading and its impact on positive ratings has been the focus for a number of researchers, but results been mixed (Surratt and Desselle 2007; Marsh 2001; Jackson et al. 1999; Cashin 1995). There is a general positive correlation between grades, either expected or actual, and student evaluations of teaching (Nerger et al. 2007; Millea and Grimes 2002; Johnson 2002; Marsh 2001; Greenwald and Gillmore 1997; Jackson et al. 1990; Cohen 1981), but Marsh and Roche 2000 caution that good grades can come from higher motivation and greater interest in the subject matter and need not constitute bias. In fact, "workload, expected grades, and their relations with SETs were stable over 12 years" (Marsh and Roche 2000). The age, race and gender of both instructor and student have shown mixed results in their impact on SETs (Surratt and Desselle 2007; Davidovitch and Dan Soen 2006; Okpala and Ellis 2005; Millea and Grimes 2002; Cashin 1995).

In our previous research, we have focused on identifying differences in student perceptions of classes taught through distance education (DE) videoconferencing depending on whether students attend at the originating or remote site. As we expected, remote-site students gave lower ratings to their DE classes than did originating-site students, and were less satisfied with the classes in general (Uttley and Carson 2006). The goal of last year's research was to identify external factors that influence SETs among faculty teaching multiple sections of the same class. We concluded that if instructors wanted to maximize their evaluations, they would teach only two sections of a class in one semester. Counterintuitively, they would teach classes that meet early on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings and they would never teach at 10:00 AM or 11:00 AM. They would teach upper level classes that are relatively large, and they would hope for a relatively low response rate on the SETs (Uttley and Carson 2007).

An additional element in the equation of SETs that is beyond the control of an instructor and not yet explored is how seriously students take the evaluations when completing them. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007) point out that the "… lack of knowledge of the actual process that students use when they respond on TEFs (teaching evaluation forms) makes it difficult to claim that studies have provided sufficient evidence of substantive validity regarding TEF ratings" (p.118). Pharmacy students saw the SETs as an opportunity to express their opinions (Surratt and Desselle 2007). Consistent with our interest is factors

beyond the control of instructors, and due to the lack of research regarding how students approach the teaching evaluation process, we chose to explore two questions: "What are students' perceptions of teaching evaluations and do they take the evaluations seriously?"

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this paper is to examine student perceptions of the method used for student evaluations of teaching (SETs). In 2004, Lander University adopted the Individual Development and Educational Assessment (IDEA) instrument to collect student perceptions of all of their classes. The College of Business and Public Affairs (COBPA) began using this instrument in the fall of 1998. Unlike the other three colleges at Lander, our college has always used a unique strategy for conducting these student evaluations of teaching. On a particular two days, about 2/3 of the way through the semester, all classes in COBPA are evaluated. A faculty member, other than the class instructor, administers the evaluations at the beginning of class. The vast majority of the students in our college take four to six classes per semester, which means that by the end of the second day, a student has seen the same evaluation instrument for up to six times. As part of our continuing research into the impact of factors that are beyond an instructor's control on their Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs), we asked students about their perceptions of the IDEA instrument and the process used by the College of Business and Public Affairs.

The IDEA instrument provides three summary measures for each class. The first measures effective teaching in terms of progress made on particular course objectives, which instructors pick from a list of 12 possible course objectives, designating each as essential, important, or not important to the particular course. Those objectives deemed essential are double weighted in the IDEA assessment calculations. Regardless of the objectives chosen by each instructor, the IDEA instrument is identical. Objectives are organized into six categories: *Basic Cognitive Background; Application of Learning; Expressiveness; Intellectual Development; Lifelong Learning;* and *Team Skills* (www.idea.ksu.edu). Most categories include multiple possible objectives, rated by students on a five-point scale from *no apparent progress* (1) to *exceptional progress* (5):

Basic Cognitive Background
1. Gaining factual knowledge (terminology, classifications, methods, trends)
2. Learning fundamental principles, generalizations, or theories

Application of Learning
3. Learning to *apply* course material (to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions)
4. Developing specific skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course

Expressiveness
6. Developing creative capacities (writing, inventing, designing, performing in art, music, drama, etc.)
8. Developing skill in expressing oneself orally or in writing

Intellectual Development
7. Gaining a broader understanding and appreciation of intellectual/cultural activity (music, science, literature, etc.)
10. Developing a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, personal values
11. Learning to *analyze* and *critically evaluate* ideas, arguments, and points of view

Lifelong Learning
9. Learning how to find and use resources for answering questions or solving problems
12. Acquiring an interest in learning more by asking questions and seeking answers

Team Skills
5. Acquiring skills in working with others as a member of a team.

The second measure is based on the single statement, "Overall, I rate this instructor an excellent teacher." Response options range from *definitely false* (1) to *definitely true* (5). The third measure is based on the single statement, "Overall, I rate this course as excellent." The responses are the same as those used for the second measure. For each measure, the IDEA center calculates raw and adjusted average scores, recommending that the adjusted scores be used for comparisons. Scores are adjusted on the basis of students' professed desire to take the course, expressed effort put forth, and perceived amount of work required.

While the literature includes other studies of student perceptions of teaching evaluation instruments and student ideas about what should be included in evaluations of teaching, we designed our study specifically to focus on the evaluation instrument and process used at Lander. Within our college in the spring 2008 semester, faculty taught 84 classes from which to collect data. Since only our college employs the two-day evaluation process, we eliminated lower level general education courses (Anthropology 104, Sociology 101, Economics 101, etc.), which are taken by students from all colleges at Lander. We invited all college faculty to participate and distributed surveys to those who agreed. Approximately one week after the completion of the evaluation instruments, surveys were distributed to students. We asked that each student complete only one survey. Thus, as the distribution time lengthened, an increasing number of students from any specific class had already completed the survey. On the survey forms, we asked students to indicate if they were at least 18 years old and that we had permission to use their data in our analyses. A few students were evidently younger than 18 and a surprising number did not give permission for us to use their data. We eliminated those surveys, which left us with 373 usable surveys from students in 35 classes. Our survey consisted of six perception questions and two demographic questions:

1. I believe the IDEA evaluation form is an accurate way for students to provide feedback to administrators about their professor's teaching objectives for the course.
2. I believe the IDEA evaluation form is an accurate way for students to provide feedback to professors regarding their teaching objectives for the course.
3. I believe the administration takes the IDEA evaluation results seriously for faculty retention, promotion, and salary increases.
4. I believe faculty take the results of the IDEA evaluations seriously.
5. I respond to the first IDEA evaluation on the first day in a serious manner; I read each question and carefully consider each of the responses, selecting the most appropriate.
6. I respond to the last IDEA evaluation form on the last day in the same serious manner as the first IDEA evaluation I respond to.
7. I am Female _____   I am Male _____
8. I am in the department of Business Administration _____
   I am in the department of Political and Social Sciences _____
   I am not in the College of Business and Public Affairs _____

The responses for each perception question were arranged in a Likert format from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The demographic questions were checked or left blank to provide a yes or no format. We used the MicroCase[*] statistical package to analyze the data. We compared students from the department of Business Administration to those from Political and Social Sciences (PaSS); we compared females to males; we compared perceptions from day one to perceptions from day two. Since our data are nominal and ordinal level, we used contingency tables for our comparisons and rely on X^2, lambda, Somer's D and percentage differences for our analyses (Fox 2003).

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[*] MicroCase Corporation, acquired in 1999 by Wadsworth, now a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSES

Due to the lack of literature on student perceptions of the IDEA instrument, we have approached our exploration with a series of questions. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of our research population. Our percentage of females and males falls between the percentages for Lander and for COBPA, which is to be expected because Sociology has many more female students, and Business has more male students. Respondents from Business represent 57% of their majors; respondents from PaSS represent 52% of their majors.

TABLE 1. Demographic characteristics of the research population.					
Variable	Valid N	%		Valid N	%
Sex	365		Department Affiliation	348	
Females	207	56.7	Business Administration	228	65.5
Males	158	43.3	Political and Social Sciences	104	29.9
			Neither	16	4.6

Table 2 includes the distribution of responses from our respondents.

TABLE 2. Distribution of responses from the research population.					
Survey Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
Accurate way to provide feedback to administrators about professor's teaching objectives.	6.7	15	7.5	52.5	18.2
Accurate way for students to provide feedback to professors about their teaching objectives.	5.4	15.0	8.0	51.7	19.8
Believe administration takes evaluation results seriously for faculty retention, promotion, and salary increases.	7.5	19.3	20.3	36.5	16.1
Believe faculty takes the results of the IDEA evaluations seriously.	5.8	12.3	19.5	42.5	20.0
Take first IDEA evaluation on the first day in a serious manner.	6.0	6.9	10.2	39.8	37.1
Take last IDEA evaluation on the last day in the same serious manner.	9.0	10.7	10.7	38.1	31.5

Exploration Questions:

Question 1: Do students differ in how seriously they think about their completion of the IDEA instrument depending on whether it is the first day or the last day of the teaching evaluations process? For our comparative analyses, we collapsed the variable responses into three categories: disagree, neither disagree nor agree, and agree. It is obvious from figure 1 that over two thirds of all students say that they approach the evaluations in a serious manner. It is also obvious that fewer students take the evaluation seriously on the last day (69.6%) compared to the first day (76.9%). The relationship is significant based on Somer's D_{yx} of 0.696 (p=0.001), a proportional reduction in error (PRE) measure, that indicates knowing a student's seriousness on day one reduces the error in predicting their seriousness on day two by nearly 70%. Ten percent of students, who stated that they approached the evaluations seriously on the first day, said that they did not approach them as seriously on the last day, the change we expected to find.

Curiously, 12.8% of students who said that they did not approach the evaluations seriously on the first day, agreed that they approached day two of the evaluations with equal seriousness.
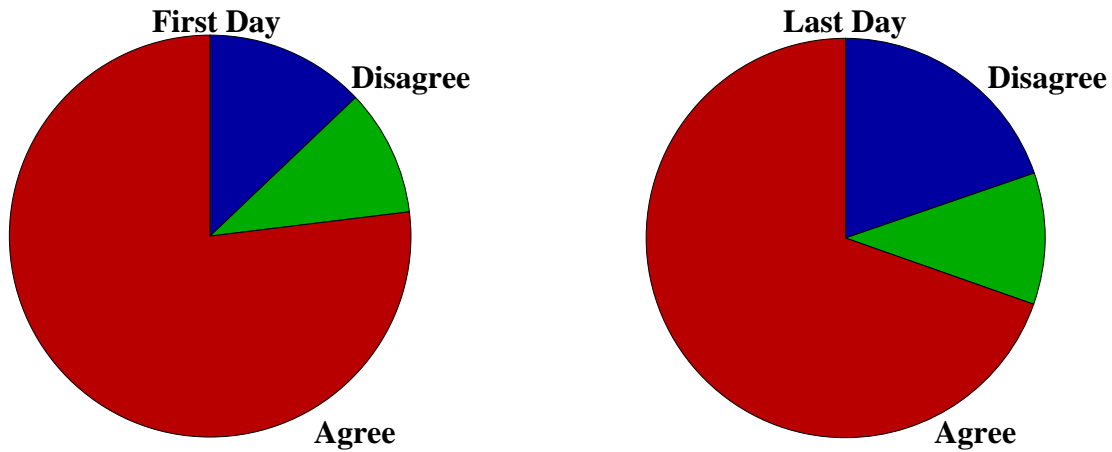

FIGURE 1. Distribution of students showing the seriousness with which they approach teaching evaluations for the first day and last day of the evaluation period.

Question 2: Do students differ in how seriously they think about their completion of the IDEA instrument based on whether they are majors in the department of business administration or political and social sciences (PaSS)? Kwan (1999) and Nerger et al. (2007) found academic discipline to be associated with differences in SETs. Do these differences reflect different perceptions about the teaching evaluation process or instrument as well? Figure 2 shows the comparison of students from business and PaSS. While a higher percentage of PaSS students (81% and 70%) than business students (77% and 69%) state that they approach the teaching evaluation process in a serious manner, neither of the differences is significant. In fact, we found no significant differences between students from the two departments.
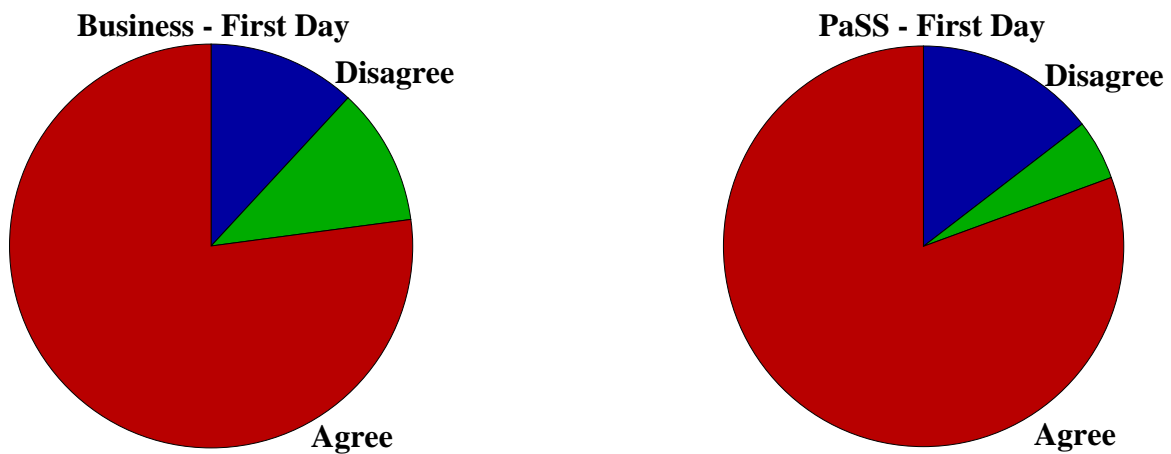

FIGURE 2a. Comparison of students from business and PaSS showing the seriousness with which they approach teaching evaluations for the first day of the evaluation period.
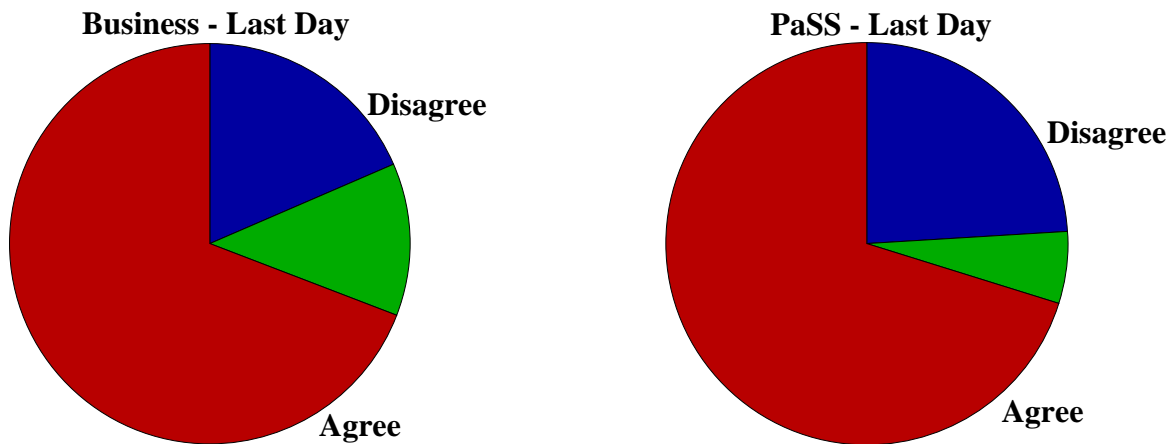
FIGURE 2b. Comparison of students from business and PaSS showing the seriousness with which they approach teaching evaluations the last day of the evaluation period.

Question 3: *Do females differ from males in how seriously they approach their completion of the IDEA instrument?* In general, females tend to evaluate teaching more positively (Millea and Grimes 2002; Davidovitch and Dan Soen 2006). Might this suggest that females also approach the process of completing teaching evaluations more seriously? In figure 3a, it is easy to see that significantly (p=0.045) more females (82%) approach the evaluation process seriously than do males (71%) on the first day of evaluations. Figure 3b shows that for the last day of evaluations, the difference between females (75.7%) and males (61.4%) is even more pronounced (p=0.008).
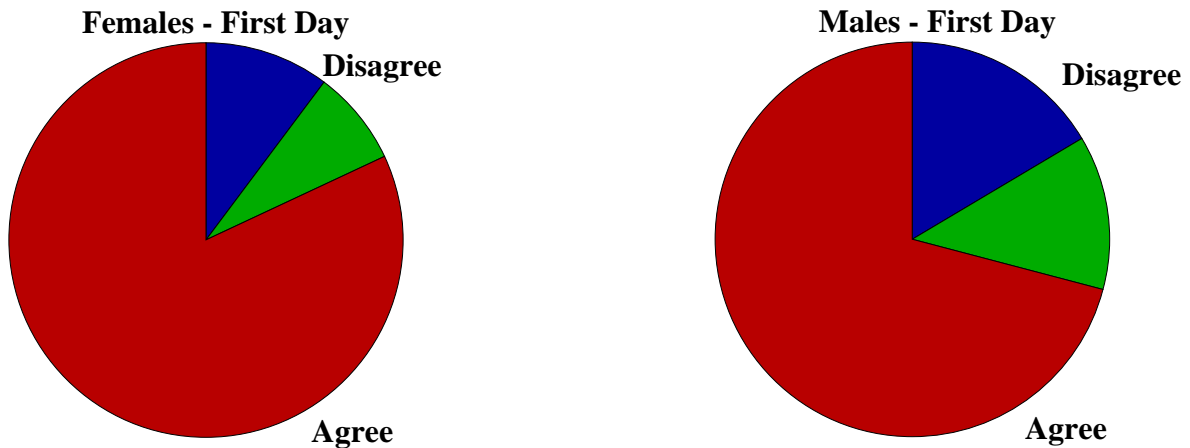

FIGURE 3a. Comparison of females and males showing the seriousness with which they approach teaching evaluations for the first day of the evaluation period.

Females - Last Day

Disagree

Agree
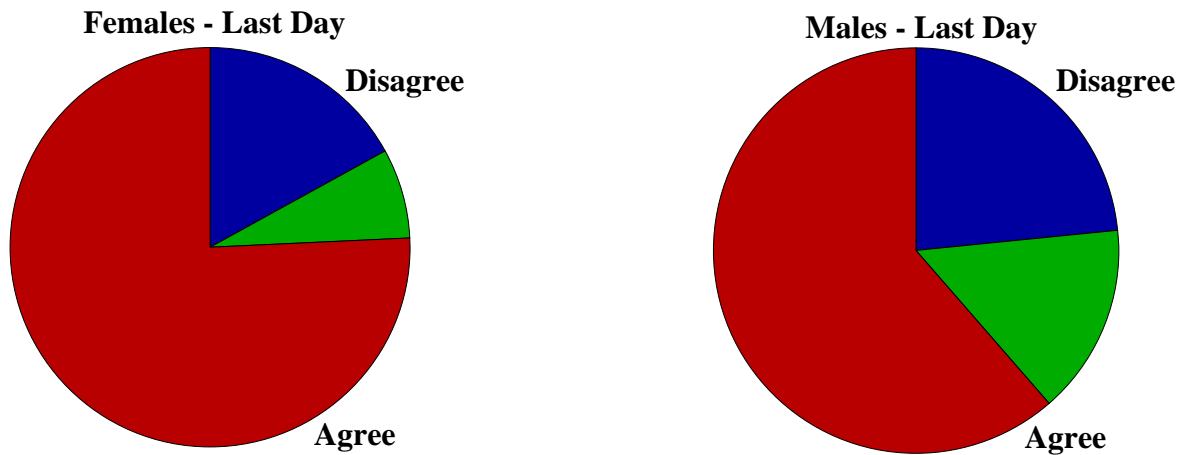

Males - Last Day

Disagree

Agree

FIGURE 3b. Comparison of females and males showing the seriousness with which they approach teaching evaluations for the last day of the evaluation period.

We found one additional significant difference between females and males. Based on Lambda (0.082), sex explains 8.2% of the variation in students' beliefs about whether the IDEA instrument provides accurate feedback about a professor's teaching objectives to the administration. This comparison is shown in figure 4 (p=0.001).

Females – Admin Feedback

Disagree

Agree

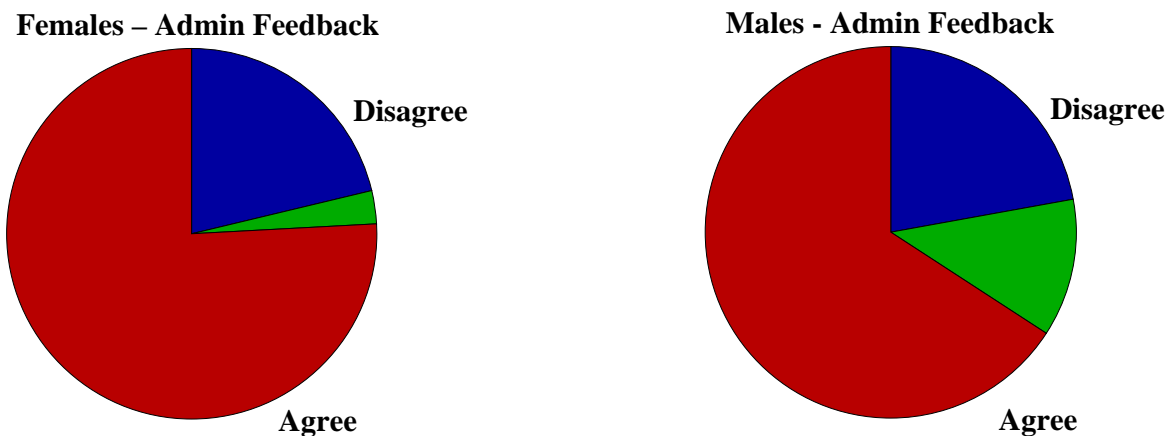
Males - Admin Feedback

Disagree

Agree

FIGURE 4. Comparison of females and males showing their beliefs that the IDEA instrument is an accurate way to provide feedback to the administration about a professor's teaching objectives.

Additionally, in our exploration, we found no significant differences between the females from the two departments or between the males of the two departments.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine what impact, if any, student perceptions have on the evaluation process of the teaching quality. A short survey using Likert-scale questions was developed to assess student's seriousness and perceptions regarding the use of the student evaluation of teaching results. This survey was administered to students approximately one week after they completed the formal student evaluation of teaching.

Our most recent findings indicate that those students who we questioned believe in large measure that the IDEA instrument is an accurate means to provide feedback to the administration as well as to the professor about his or her teaching objectives. In measuring both usefulness to administrator and instructor slightly better than 70% of the students we questioned believed it to be an accurate feedback tool. Conversely, while they perceived it to be useful they did not feel as strongly that the administration took the student evaluations seriously. On this dimension only slightly better than 50% of the students we queried perceived the administration was serious in its use of the instrument when determining retention, promotion and salary increases. On the other hand, and again slightly better than 70% of the queried students believe that the instructors took the results of the IDEA evaluation seriously. Finally, we observe from the data that there a measurable difference, although slight, in perception about the level of seriousness depending on whether or not the evaluations occur on the first or last day of the evaluation period. The difference between these two days is slightly better than7% indicating that evaluations rendered on the last day of the evaluation period may not be given the same attention as those rendered on the first day.

Our survey instrument had some problems. In addition to the 228 usable surveys from the department of business administration, 18 students (7.3%) failed to check the line giving us permission to use their data. In addition to the 104 usable surveys from the department of political and social sciences, 14 students (12%) also failed to give permission for us to use the data. In addition, 6 students, who were not in our college or did not identify their college, also failed to give us permission to use their data. On the survey instrument, the line under the introductory instructions included two blanks to be checked: the first asked students to indicate that they were at least 18 years of age; the second asked for permission to use the data. The majority of the students, who did not give us permission to use their data, did check the blank indicating their ages. We suspect that this horizontal layout explains the missed blank. On future surveys, we will arrange these two indicators vertically and use check boxes, rather than lines. Hopefully, the modified layout will decrease the likelihood that students will miss these items.

Our second set of identifiers was also problematic. We asked students to indicate their academic affiliation. A few students checked that they were in either the department of business administration or political and social sciences and also checked that they were not in our college. We did not realize that students did not know the name of the college in which their department was housed. It should be easy to avoid this confusion in the future if we asked students to indicate their department, but if not the departments in our college, to indicate their major.

While entering data, we noticed a contradiction in a sequence of answers. About 10% of students, who said that they did not take the evaluations seriously on the first day, stated that they approached the second-day evaluations with equal seriousness. Obviously, their answers mean that they never took the evaluations seriously. This problem occurred because of the wording of our questions. Both of these questions should have asked how seriously students approached the evaluations. The answers could have ranged from very seriously to not at all seriously in a Likert format.

We did not include an open-ended question asking for comments, an oversight. We did, however, receive two useful comments. One student wrote, "Just let us write what we think!" which we assume refers to faculty performance. Another student commented that they did not think the majority of students took the evaluations seriously unless the felt they had been wronged in some way.

Based on the research of Davidovitch and Dan Soen (2006), who found that instructors of mandatory courses received lower evaluations compared to instructors of electives, we should have asked if students took evaluations for required classes more seriously than those for electives.

Several studies, Nerger et al. 2007; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007; Clayson and Sheffet 2006; Okpapa and Ellis 2005; Clayson 1999; Clayson and Haley 1990, have identified that characteristics of an instructor's

personality are directly correlated to both instructor and course ratings. We should have asked if the professor presented a positive personality in the classroom. In the same area of reference Surratt and Desselle (2007) found that students were more willing to complete the teaching evaluation if they really liked or disliked the professor. We should have asked if students were more likely to complete the questionnaire based on their like or dislike of the professor.

Based on our findings we need to examine what students used as a measurement of seriousness on the part of administration and instructor. This could be addressed in an open ended question, What would you like to see happen with the results of the IDEA evaluations?

Our intent for the future is to continue examining the IDEA evaluation instrument emphasizing student attitudes, sex and academic discipline differences. We believe that this research continues to challenge the received wisdom regarding the validity and reliability of the IDEA evaluation instrument. The need to implement the most valid and reliable instrument to gauge teaching quality is vital in the world of accountability.

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