

AEJMC 2009 Boston, MA
“The Doctors Are In”
Elected Standing Committee on Teaching

Evaluations topic: **Interpreting Evaluation Feedback**

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Introduction:

Interpreting the results of course evaluations can be the most difficult part of the evaluation process. This information sheet will take the mystery out of interpreting course evaluation by presenting starting guidelines and the differences in gathering useful information from quantitative and qualitative questions.

General Guidelines for Interpretation:

- Balance positive and negative comments
 - Consider both the positive and negative comments from students when interpreting your evaluations. Do not place undue emphasis on either.

- Understand the difference between common and unique comments
 - Students tend to complain about the same issue and some of these issues cannot be resolved. For example, if a student writes “grade easier” on your evaluation sheet, this is not an issue that can be resolved. Know which complaints are typical for your course and your department and which complaints and suggestions are unique to you as the instructor.

- Identify the problems and develop a solutions
 - Students may address their feelings and ideas on an evaluation sheet, however the job of determining the underlying problem related to these complaints is the work of the instructor. Collective look at all suggestions and complaints to search for common links, then develop solutions to those problems and make the necessary adjustments to the course and instruction.

Interpreting Quantitative Feedback:

Quantitative feedback summarizes and explains the numerical results of the sum of various “forced-choice” questions on a student evaluation sheet.

Understanding Common Statistical Terms

n = the sample size; number; the total number of students who completed the evaluation

Mean = the average score; it is achieved by summing all scores and dividing by N

Median = the middle score; it is achieved by ordering all scores from smallest to greatest locating the central score

Mode = the most frequently achieved score

Standard Deviation = the distribution of responses around the mean; this demonstrates consistency within the scores, indicating how close or far apart the scores are from each other

Understanding the Normal Curve

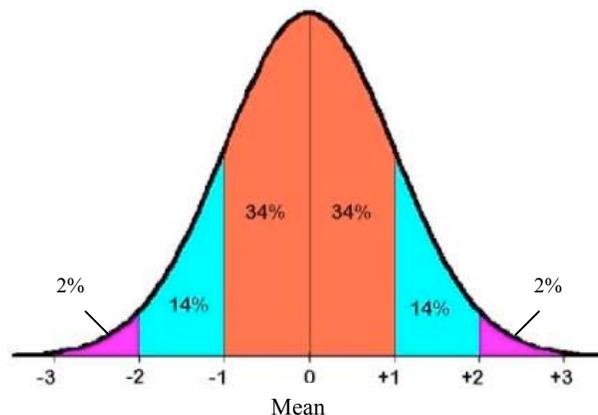


Image taken from: http://jamesstacks.com/stat/norm_areas.htm

The normal curve is helpful in understanding the use of standard deviation in teaching evaluations. Each standard deviation is represented on the chart above (as SD) from +2 to -2. These are the number of standard deviations above or below the mean score.

Example: For your mean score on your teaching evaluations you received an 8.7. This means that on a scale of 1 to 10 your average score was an 8.7. If for example your standard deviation was .4, this would mean that within one standard deviation below your mean ($8.7 - .4$) and one standard deviation above your mean ($8.7 + .4$) your scores would fall between 8.3 and 9.1. This information is helpful because according to the chart, 68% of the total number of scores falls within – or + 1 standard deviation of the mean, meaning that 68% of your scores fall within 8.3 and 9.1.

Comparing Quantitative Results

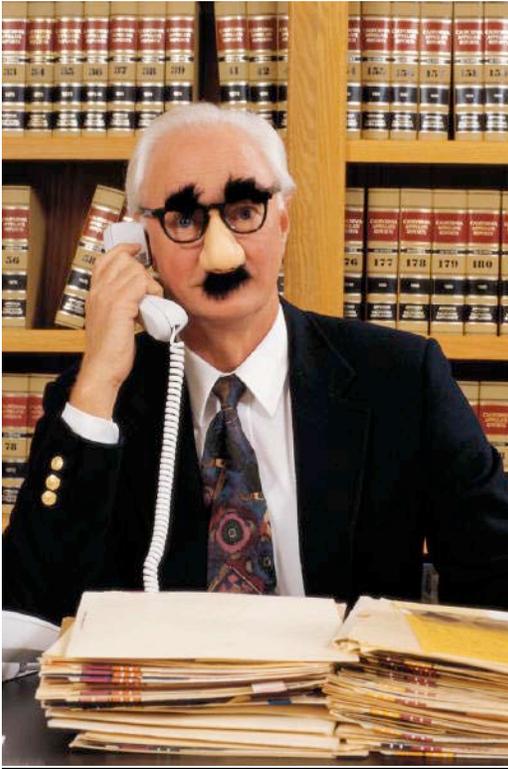
Many colleges and universities give statistical reports from the individual course, the department, and the university as a whole.

This information can be used to:

- compare your personal means and standard deviations with the average means and standard deviations of others in your department

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- compare your personal means and standard deviations with the average means and standard deviations and of your other colleagues within your college or university
- use to gauge how your personal evaluation statistics fit in within the larger picture of your collegiate community



Interpreting Qualitative Feedback

Qualitative data may be somewhat more difficult to manage considering the open-ended responses resulting from open-ended questions. On one hand, this level of data offer rich insight into teaching effectiveness; however, the challenge of how to manage the data remains. Teachers may wish to review the qualitative results separately and with the department head. Together they may be able to form a workable synthesis. The faculty member could digest the student comments and collect themes—both positive and negative—for reporting. Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Excellence recommends that teachers can maximize usefulness and reliability of qualitative feedback (e.g., open-ended letters from students) when the students are provided specific instructions of what to address in their letters. The following is excerpted from Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Excellence:

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1. **Factual Knowledge:** how well did the instructor help you acquire and integrate new terms, information and methods? Please give explicit examples where possible.
2. **Concepts and Principles:** how well did the instructor organize the material covered into a comprehensive whole? Were important concepts and principles from theory interrelated? Please give explicit examples where possible.
3. **Application:** Do you feel that the instructor's teaching and course structure enabled you to apply what you learned in the course to concrete problems? Were you able to generalize beyond the text? Please give explicit examples where possible.
4. **Motivation:** Did you feel the instructor was sufficiently motivated about the subject matter to excite your own interest in it? Describe how the instructor communicated a sense of enthusiasm about teaching.
5. **Self Understanding:** To what degree did the instructor help you become more aware of yourself as a learner? Describe specific experiences where the instructor contributed to your feeling empowered in your ability to learn.
6. **Improvement of Instruction:** Did the instructor seek out information from you and experiment with ways of improving his or her teaching? To what degree was the instructor open to feedback on improving the course? How confident are you in the instructor's ability to continually develop as a teacher? Please be as specific as possible.

Being mindful of these domains and training students on the evaluation process will help teachers collect information that will help them stop doing what does not work; continue doing what works; and try something new based on a student suggestion.

Citations:

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<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k1985&pageid=icb.page29703>

Faculty Teaching and Learning Center, Grand Valley State University

<http://www.gvsu.edu/ftlc/index.cfm?id=000B460E-8C19-1F5F-81DF80C44E1C0000>

Interpreting and Using Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness, Syracuse University

<http://cstl.syr.edu/cstl2/Home/Teaching%20Support/Teaching%20at%20SU/Student%20Ratings/12A400a.pdf>

The McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning, Princeton University

<http://www.princeton.edu/mcgraw/library/sat-tipsheets/interpreting-evaluations/>

Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence

<http://www.cte.cornell.edu/resources/teh/ch3.html>