## How to increase your course evaluations.

I am often asked by faculty what they can do to increase their end-of-term course evaluations. My first answer is to consult with the experts at the Center for Teaching Excellence. They have years of experience working with faculty and great knowledge of the literature on teaching in higher education.

Beyond getting expert help in teaching are there other steps faculty can take to improve their ratings? It turns out that there are two steps.

- 1. Have students do an evaluation early in the term
- 2. Encourage students to submit their evaluations early in the evaluation period at the end of the term.

## Early Feedback.

Early-Feedback evaluations are offered to all faculty in all courses at Texas A&M, usually during the fifth week of the fall and spring semesters. These are offered at no cost to the department or the individual faculty. The purpose is to provide feedback at a point in the term when the instructor can make adjustments to the course. Results are reported only to the instructor.

Although the percentage of courses that use the early feedback evaluation is less than 10%, enough were submitted in fall 2010 to allow an analysis of the overall means for early feedback and end-of-term evaluations. By using online data, we were able to identify students who had submitted both early feedback and end-of-term evaluations and compare their end-of-term ratings with those of students who had not submitted early feedback evaluations. The results, as presented in Table 1, indicate that undergraduate students who submitted early feedback evaluations, tended to rate their instructors higher at the end-of-term than did students who had not submitted an early feedback evaluation. The difference is statistically significant. For graduate and professional students, there was no difference.

Table 1. Mean end-of-term evaluation score. Early feedback submission versus no submission, undergraduate versus graduate/professional.

	<b>Undergraduate End of</b>	Graduate/professional
	term mean rating	end of term mean rating
No early feedback	4.16	4.30
submission		
Early feedback	4.33	4.29
submission		

While it is tempting to attribute the difference between the undergraduate means to improvements in the course or teaching as a result of the early feedback, that is probably not the entire explanation. Many faculty have pointed out that, in most

courses, there is little that can be changed once the course has started. It might be possible to make small corrections, but large ones are unlikely.

Early feedback ratings tend to be as high as or higher than end-of-term ratings by the same students (4.36 undergrad, 4.34 grad/professional), which might indicate that instructors are not using the feedback to improve their teaching or the course, or, if they are using it, the improvements are not reflected in the ratings. The fact that early feedback means are slightly higher could even indicate that students are punishing the instructors for making small changes when large ones are desired.

It should be kept in mind that some faculty use different sets of items for the early feedback and end-of-term questionnaires. The two have different purposes as well. The differences in items and purposes make comparisons of the means problematic.

Why are early feedback means so high to begin with? There are two possibilities. The first is that instructors who opt to do early feedback evaluations are more conscientious and more analytical about their teaching and, therefore, are more likely to do better in the classroom. The second possibility is that, by soliciting early-feedback, instructors are demonstrating to students that their opinions matter and students, in turn, are rewarding their instructors with higher ratings.

Although we might never untangle the dynamics behind the phenomenon, the fact remains that undergraduates who do an early feedback evaluation, tend to rate their instructors higher on end-of-term evaluations than students who do not do early feedback evaluations.

## Submission of evaluation early in the evaluation period.

The normal online evaluation period runs for two weeks at the end of the semester. In fall 2010, the evaluation period began a few days earlier than normal because the Thanksgiving recess fell in the middle of what would have been the first week (second to last week of the semester.) It was felt that students would not be thinking about their courses during that period, therefore, they should have a few extra days. Normally the evaluation period ends on the last day of class, but, to accommodate the SRATE evaluation (since discontinued), it was extended into the reading days. Thus, the total evaluation period for fall spanned twenty days from November 20 through December 9.

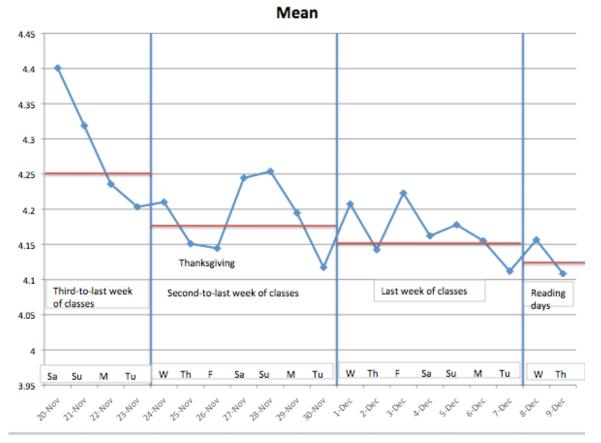
The literature on student ratings of faculty indicates that students form their opinions about the teacher and the course early in the semester and that these opinions rarely change at the end. A look at the typical questions on a student ratings form will reveal questions such as, "The course was well-organized." "Help was readily available outside of class." "The exams were graded fairly." There is little that an instructor can do in the final weeks of the course to change opinions

about those things. If the class was not organized until then, it's too late to get organized in the final weeks.

What can be added in the final weeks? About the only thing that is added is examstress that comes from approaching finals or project deadlines. To see if examstress had any effect on ratings, we calculated the average rating submitted on each day of the evaluation period in fall 2010. The results are presented in Figure 1.

The plot of means shows a declining trend from the first day, November 20, to the last day, December 9. The plot is divided into the three last weeks of the semester plus the reading days. The horizontal red lines indicate the means for each period. Clearly the best day, from the standpoint of the overall mean, is the first day, with the last day being the worst. Final exams began on December 10. The next to worst day is December 7, the last day of class. High days tend to be associated with weekends, especially Saturday and Sunday in the first and second weeks and Friday of the third week. The reason for the drop at Thanksgiving is unknown. Tuesday is the lowest day in each of the first three periods.

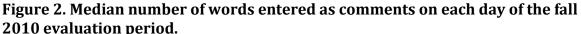
Figure 1. Mean ratings on each day of the fall 2010 evaluation period.

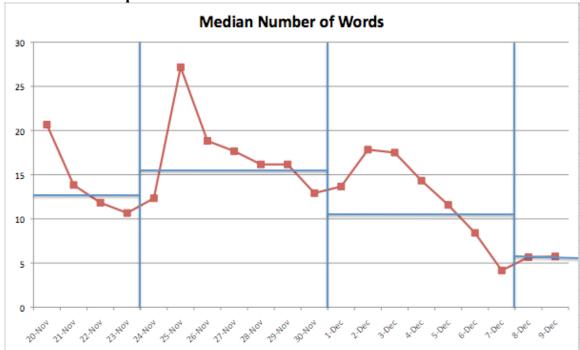


## Comments.

In general, instructors appreciate comments from the students and give more credence to the comments than to ratings. It is not uncommon to hear faculty say, "The front side of the form [where the ratings are given] is for you [university administration] and the back side [where comments are provided] is for me." The brackets are mine. "Front side" and "back side" have no meaning for electronic evaluations, but the point remains the same. Faculty appreciate comments.

We did a simple word count of the comments entered by each student and plotted the median number of words for each day of the evaluation period in Figure 2. The horizontal blue lines indicate the median for each period. As with the mean ratings, the median number of words tends to decline during the period. On the first day of the evaluation period, 50% of the submissions had more than twenty words of comments. By the end of the evaluation period, the median number of words had dropped to about five. Comments do not appear to drop off precipitously until near the end of the term when median number of comments fall into single digits on the last two days of class and the reading days. Also of interest is the spike in comments on Thanksgiving Day when students are freed from most academic obligations.





Based on examinations of the ratings and the word-count of the comments, two conclusions seem warranted.

- 1. Overall mean ratings drop as the end of term approaches, so faculty can help themselves by encouraging students to submit their evaluations early. In particular, faculty should not wait until the last meeting of the class to inform students of the evaluation.
- 2. Faculty who desire feedback in the form of comments from students will find it to their advantage to encourage students to submit their evaluations before students feel the pressures of exams and deadlines.