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TEACHING EVALUATION:
A SURVEY OF ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS

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Introduction

Few issues in academia raise as many conflicting opinions among the various constituencies of a university as does the subject of student evaluations. Faculty members either welcome student evaluations, live with them, or condemn them. Administrators may view them as a panacea, discount them as meaningless, or view them as one of many inputs necessary to judge the "worthiness" of an individual faculty member. Students believe they have the right to evaluate the faculty but they question how much reliance is placed on their views by the faculty and administration.¹

The controversy/dialogue over student evaluations, their validity, and, hence, their usefulness is not a new issue. A search of the literature shows that the issue has been an ongoing concern for some sixty years, with strong interest developing during the 1920's and early 1930's.² The interest in teaching evaluation during the 1950's and 1960's is best evidenced by the studies of Guthrie, McKeachie,^{3,4,5} and Gustad. J. W. Gustad surveyed 584 colleges and universities and found that student ratings were the most common method of evaluating instructional quality.⁵ By 1967, however, Gustad reported that there had been a "substantial decline in the use of student rating."⁶

A recent survey article by W. J. McKeachie indicates that student evaluations have once again become a subject of considerable interest and controversy among university constituents.⁷ Contributing to this

recent attention is the concern of the public (through their legislative representatives) and of the trustees (of private universities) to insure that their university is responsible, accountable, efficient, and cost effective.⁸ Supposedly, "efficient" colleges and universities cannot afford to retain a teacher who is not effective - although whether a good teacher (as perceived by students) is an effective teacher is still subject to question.^{9,10,11}

This revival of interest, which coincided with advancements in data processing, has resulted in a recent spate of articles discussing the validity and reliability of student evaluations. The majority of these articles attempt to validate, through statistical or other quantitative methods, the reliability of such ratings. Space does not permit a thorough review of all the arguments, pro and con, regarding student evaluations nor does it permit a complete review of the conclusions presented in the articles. However, the following comments by W. J. McKeachie and colleagues best sum the results of the substantial inquiry into the question of validity and reliability of student ratings of teaching effectiveness:

Our results taken together with the earlier studies. . . do not invalidate the use of student ratings as one source of evidence about teacher effectiveness, but they are less convincing than we had hoped for. . .

So student ratings have some usefulness. Why aren't they better? Our best guess is that the major slippage in our validity studies is the differing goals of teachers and students.¹¹ (1971)

Student ratings are not automatically valid and useful. . . Thus we need to understand what student ratings can and cannot do before embarking upon large scale institutional programs of student ratings.⁷ (1979)

One purpose of this study is to investigate alumni perceptions of effective and ineffective teaching. It is doubtful whether any university

faculty member has sat through a meeting discussing the usefulness of student evaluations without hearing the argument that students cannot, in any valid sense, evaluate teaching effectiveness without the benefit of the leavening effect of several years of real world experience. This criticism typically is stated as, "Students can't really appreciate good teaching until they have been out of school for awhile" or "I want my students to appreciate my teaching in five to ten years; I'm not interested in what they think of my teaching now." Recently, Professor J. S. Reed stated:

Take, for example, the student course evaluations that are sometimes used as a measure of an instructor's "teaching effectiveness."

Now, these things have their place. . .

But as a measure of an individual professor's teaching effectiveness (teaching evaluations) are sadly lacking. To measure that, why not survey the opinions. . . of alumni a few years out of college?8

This study represents an attempt to do as Professor Reed proposes: i.e., survey alumni and determine if their opinions on "good" and "bad" teaching, and other qualitative perceptions about their education, have changed or shifted over the years.

Any evidence that can be garnered on the attitudes of alumni toward effective teaching has important implications, not only for the validity but also the reliability and, hence, the usefulness of student ratings. Whether attitudes and perceptions regarding teaching effectiveness change over time and experience seems an important question. However, there have been relatively few attempts to measure such shifts. Most studies that have investigated changing perceptions of teaching effectiveness tested for the changes over periods covering two weeks, one semester or

3,12,13,14
one year. Perhaps the classic study designed to measure the extent of shifting perceptions over time was conducted by Drucker and Remmers.¹⁵ These researchers found a correlation of approximately .60 between current student evaluations and evaluations of alumni who had graduated at least ten years prior to their study. The previous studies, as a group, suggest that the correlation between current and past ratings tends to decline as the interval between evaluations lengthens.

As is true of so many issues surrounding the usefulness of student ratings of teaching, perhaps no really strong conclusions can be promulgated from the previous studies. It does seem safe to say, however, that with the recent revival of the use of teaching evaluations, the issue of the reliability of such evaluations over a significant period of time is of current significance. It is the purpose of this study to provide some qualitative information on this issue.

The authors recognize the inherent limitations of any survey. Hopefully, however, the findings will provide some insight on the subject and prove to be of interest to future research in this area.

The Sample

The E. Claiborne Robins School of Business of the University of Richmond had 243 students in the graduating classes of 1974 and 1975. In 1981 a questionnaire was mailed to the 243 graduates. From the first mailing, 79 graduates (32.5 percent) completed and returned the questionnaire and 15 mailings were returned because of incorrect addresses. Using a random sample, 53 graduates were included in our second mailing, and 13 of these questionnaires were completed and returned. The two mailings produced a total of 92 completed questionnaires out of a population

of 243 graduates for a response rate of 38 percent. Since 15 of the graduates did not receive the questionnaire because of outdated mailing addresses, 40 percent of the delivered questionnaires were returned.

Responses from the two mailings were tabulated and analyzed separately. Since there were no distinguishable differences in the responses, the questionnaires from the two mailings were combined.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into three parts: personal data, perception and evaluation of professors, and perception and evaluation of course work. The appendix contains a copy of the questionnaire; however, the space for responding to questions is not shown.

Personal Data

The 92 responding graduates presented the following majors for graduation: Accounting, 15; Economics, 6; Finance, 39; Management, 23; Marketing, 22; and 13 presented a double major. If these respondents were entering college today, approximately one-half of them would select a different major within the Business School, but only three of the ninety-two respondents would pursue a major outside the Business School.

Their positions with their company in 1981 varied greatly, as would be expected, and were too numerous to mention. However, their positions ran the gamut in the organizational structure from laborer to president.

Three of the respondents were not employed, and the remainder worked for various sized firms which can be shown as follows:

<u>Firm Size</u>	<u>Number Respondents</u>
0-100	39
101-500	9
501-1000	7
1001-5000	15
5000-over	19

Perception and Evaluation of Professors

It is often argued that student evaluations of their current professors are not meaningful because the same students, given 5 or 6 years in the labor market, will change their perceptions and evaluations of these professors. That is, professors they perceived as poor professors while students will in 5 or 6 years be perceived as their better professors. To carry this argument full circle means that professors receiving good evaluations from their students would, in a few years, be given a poor evaluation by the same individuals. The results of the questionnaire used in this study do not support the idea that the perception of poor professors improves with time. The results do indicate, however, that over time the good professors get better, as perceived by their former students, while the perception of poor professors remains the same or declines.

Seventy-six percent of the respondents have not changed their perception and evaluation of their best professors. Three percent say their evaluation of these professors have declined, while a surprisingly large twenty-one percent now believe their best professors were even better than they recognized while they were students. There were two main reasons given for the improved perception of these better professors. Most respondents indicated that experience in the real world allowed them to better evaluate what the professors were trying to achieve in class and they now

realize the full value of these professors to their education. A smaller group of respondents now value these professors more highly because they have attended other colleges since graduation and by comparison, believe these professors were better than they had realized. Ninety-one percent of the respondents have not changed their evaluation of the professors they considered their worst. However, eight percent indicated they now would rate these professors lower than they rated them while they were students. A typical comment was "the more I think about it the more I realize that those professors really wasted my time."

The respondents were asked to rank from 1-3 (one being the highest) the following characteristics of their best professors. The rankings were then weighted by giving a number 1 rank a weight of 3, a number 2 a weight of 2, and a number 3 a weight of 1. The results of the ranking and weighting procedure are shown below:

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Weighted Value</u>
Related subject to real world	165
Showed concern and interest for students	108
Fair	98
Demanding (set high standards)	77
Required that students be prepared for class	60
Lectures covered material not in text	59
Encouraged class participation	58
Sense of humor	48
Demanded students' attention in class	40

The most important characteristic of the better professor was that he related his subject to the real world. It was also important that these professors showed concern for and interest in their students and that they were fair. The fourth most highly rated characteristic was that the professor be demanding and set high standards for his class.

The respondents were also asked to rank from 1-3 the characteristics of their worst professors. Using the same weighting procedure produced the following results:

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Weighted Value</u>
No structure to class	116
Did not challenge students	90
Did not require students to work	81
Intimidated students	77
Always believed he was right	69
Not prepared for class	61
No sense of humor	48
Graded "too easy"	42
Not available outside of class	36

The highest ranked (worst) characteristic of these professors was that they had no structure to their classes. It is encouraging to note that the second and third ranked characteristics were "did not challenge students" and "did not require students to work."

Perception and Evaluation of Course Work

The respondents were asked to list courses that have been the most helpful to them since graduation. As was expected, various accounting courses were mentioned most often, followed by finance courses. Courses in economics ranked third. A large number of the respondents (82%) also indicated that they believed these courses would be important to them at the time they were taking the courses.

There are three major areas in which the respondents now believe they should have been offered additional course work. Fifteen of the respondents indicated that additional computer related courses would have been helpful to them in their work. Twelve respondents would have preferred additional courses in communication skills (both writing and public

speaking) and eleven respondents mentioned human relations and personnel management courses.

Questions 12, 13 and 14 were related to the "quality" of the education the respondents believed they received. They were first asked if they felt they were receiving a "quality" education while they were attending college and then asked if they had changed their views since leaving college. Ninety respondents answered the two questions. Sixty-seven (74%) of the respondents thought they were receiving a "quality" education while they were in school and they still believe they received a "quality" education. There were twenty-two respondents that felt they did not receive a "quality" education; however, thirteen of these individuals have come to this conclusion after leaving school. Only one respondent felt he was not receiving a "quality" education while in school but has now changed his belief.

The thirteen respondents that no longer believe they received a "quality" education, even though they thought they were while attending school, all had basically the same complaint. They were not as well prepared for the pressures of the real world as they thought they should have been after graduating from college. However, thirty of the ninety-two respondents have attended graduate school (only one of the above mentioned thirteen respondents) and nineteen indicated they were well prepared, eleven believed they were adequately prepared and none of the thirty felt their undergraduate curriculum had not prepared them for graduate studies.

Conclusions

The respondents graduated either in 1974 or 1975 and had been in the labor market for six or seven years at the time they completed the

questionnaires. The results suggest that the perception of good professors may improve with time but not the perception of poor professors. Good professors relate their subject to the real world, are concerned and interested in their students and are fair in their dealings with students. Poor professors have unstructured classes and do not challenge or require students to work.

The respondents believe that some of their classes have been helpful to them but they now feel they should have had additional course work in computers, communication skills, and human relations and personnel management. Most of the respondents (89%) believed they were receiving a "quality" education while they were attending college and three-fourths of them still feel the same way. The thirteen respondents that no longer believe they received a "quality" education complain that they were not as well prepared for the real world as they thought they should have been after graduating from college.

As to the question or issue of the temporal stability of student evaluations of teaching, the results of the survey suggest that such evaluations are reliable over a considerable period of time - in this case six to seven years. The fact that seventy-six percent (in the case of best professors) and ninety-one percent (in the case of worst professors) of the respondents have not changed their earlier perceptions of professors since leaving school lends support to the position that student evaluations can be useful as at least one indicator of teaching effectiveness. The results of this survey generally support the conclusions of the few previous studies on the issue even though the present study has taken a more qualitative approach to examining alumni perceptions over a longer interval of time.

APPENDIX

ALUMNAE/ALUMNI QUESTIONNAIRE

Personal Data

When you attended the School of Business, in which of the following did you major?

Accounting _____
Economics _____
Finance _____
Management _____
Marketing _____

What is your present position? _____

What is the approximate size (number of employees) of your firm? _____

Male _____ Female _____

Perception and Evaluation of Professors

1. When you were attending the School of Business, were the professors you then considered your best, teaching courses in your Major _____ Other _____ Both _____?

2. Since graduating from the School of Business, has your perception and evaluation of these professors Improved _____ Remained Same _____ Declined _____?

If your answer in question 2 is either "improved" or "declined", would you briefly explain why you have changed your mind.

4. When you were attending the School of Business, were the professors you then considered your worst, teaching courses in your Major _____ Other _____ Both _____?

5. Since graduating from the School of Business, has your perception and evaluation of these professors Improved _____ Remained Same _____ Declined _____?

6. If your answer in question 5 is either "improved" or "declined", would you briefly explain why you have changed your mind.

7. Which of the following characteristics did your best professors have that make them stand out from your other professors? (Please rank from 1-3 the characteristics you believe most important.)

- _____ 1. Related subject to real world
- _____ 2. Lectures covered material not in text
- _____ 3. Required that students be prepared for class
- _____ 4. Demanding (set high standards)
- _____ 5. Fair
- _____ 6. Showed concern and interest for students
- _____ 7. Encouraged class participation
- _____ 8. Sense of humor
- _____ 9. Demanded students' attention in class
- _____ 10. _____

8. Which of the following characteristics did your worst professors have that make them stand out from your other professors? (Please rank from 1-3 the characteristics you believe most important.)

- 1. Did not require students to work
- 2. No structure to class
- 3. Intimidated students
- 4. Not available outside of class
- 5. Did not challenge students
- 6. No sense of humor
- 7. Not prepared for class
- 8. Always believed he was right
- 9. Graded "too easy"
- 10. _____

Perception and Evaluation of Course Work

9. What course or courses did you take at the School of Business that has proven the most helpful to you in your work?
10. Did you feel that the courses listed in question 9 were "important" courses when you were taking them?
Yes _____ No _____
11. Now that you have had business experience, what additional college course offerings do you feel would have been helpful?
12. While you were attending the School of Business, did you feel that you were receiving a "quality" education?
Yes _____ No _____
13. Would you now answer question 12 the same way?
Yes _____ No _____
14. If your answer in question 13 is different from your answer in question 12, would you briefly explain why you have changed your mind.
15. If you were now attending the University of Richmond, in which of the following areas would you major?
- Accounting _____
 - Economics _____
 - Finance _____
 - Management _____
 - Marketing _____
 - Other than Business _____
16. If you have attended graduate school, were you
Well prepared _____ Adequately prepared _____ Not prepared _____?
17. Please give other comments.

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