

Course Evaluations at East Texas Baptist University

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Honors Project

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Introduction

Over the past few years, as universities grow and look for ways to improve, student evaluations of courses have become a topic of discussion in the world of academia. Researchers have noted the importance of student evaluations and the role they play in the continued development of faculty at the university level (Care, 2009; Lord, 2008; Moriarty, 2009; Serdyukova, Tatum, & Serdyukov, 2010), but they have also wondered whether or not faculty and universities are using evaluations to the fullest extent, or for their desired purpose. An additional concern regarding course evaluations is student perception of the course evaluation process, and whether or not there is a mismatch between student understanding of the evaluation process and the emphasis placed on them by faculty and academic institutions. Researchers are even finding that “most students simply don’t know what good teaching is” (Lord, 2008, p. 74).

As a student at East Texas Baptist University, I have heard students make comments about how terrible a professor is, or how much work professors give, or even how wonderful a certain professor’s class is, but then wonder why nothing is ever done to reward the positives or improve negative factors. What is the use of course evaluations if not to improve student learning, and to help professors and faculty grow and develop? The intent of this study is to discover how the course evaluations used at ETBU effect professors and students.

In my past five semesters at ETBU, I have filled out course evaluations every semester. Some have been for outstanding professors whom I have given high ratings and encouragement in their teaching. I have also had teachers who are on the other end of the spectrum. On the evaluations these professors have earned low scores and short

comments from me on how I feel that they could improve, or changes to the course that I would view as beneficial for future students. As a student though, I never know exactly what professors do with my ratings and comments, but I can say that many of the professors who needed improvement, in my mind, have not changed, or seemed to not take into consideration my suggestions. After spending the time to fill out these evaluations and then coming to find out that they are not really being put to use, I begin to wonder, what is the point? Does my opinion really matter? This is where my interest in this study began. I want to discover how the course evaluations impact the faculty here at ETBU and how other students view this “valuable” tool.

Anecdotal Student Concerns

Through research and my years here at ETBU, I have found that students have a variety of approaches to completing course evaluations. On one end of the spectrum are the students who do not even read the evaluations, and just give “all fives” down the page because it is easy. Some fill them out simply to receive the extra credit promised to them on their final. Other student concerns stem from whether or not their opinions are truly anonymous. This is an even greater concern for a small university such as ETBU, where there may only be ten to fifteen students in a class. An interesting statement that has been heard throughout the student body is that students may not give an honest evaluation of a class or professor because they may have the professor again, and do not want to be found out and upset the professor. Students may base their scores solely on the grade received in the class. It is all too easy to claim that a professor is too hard, or the class is too difficult, or there was too much homework when a student earns a bad grade in the class. The converse is true: if a student receives a good grade, then they are more likely to

rate a professor higher. According to Cavanaugh (2009), “There is a considerable amount of research that has found that grades actually do affect the evaluations students provide” (p. 112). While students may be the best for the job of evaluating classes, are they really giving an honest and accurate evaluation?

Professor Concerns

Just as students have concerns and apprehensions towards course evaluations, so do professors. To a professor, a course evaluation is a report card of how they performed during the semester. Some professors may not bat an eye at the fact that students can speak freely, but for many professors course evaluations send chills down their spine. Through casual conversations with professors on campus, and statements professors have made in classes many common threads have emerged regarding how professors view course evaluations. Professors have been heard saying that they are afraid to try new techniques or activities in their classroom for fear of what students might say or how it would be reflected on their course evaluations. Just as students can give bad evaluations based on the feeling that there is too much work, or a class is too hard, some professors have changed how rigorous their course is or how much is asked of students to avoid a harsh or bad evaluation. Professors not only have to worry about having their feelings hurt or their self-confidence damaged due to comments received in course evaluations, they may even worry about losing their position, not being eligible for a promotion, or even being fired based upon their scores. Another statement that professors have commonly made is that course evaluations that are university-wide may be too generic, and therefore produce poor scores because they ask the wrong questions, or the questions asked are not suited to their discipline. Lastly, and what seems to be the most important

for this study, is that some professors do not pay any attention to their scores or results because they feel that students will be too mean, do not care, or simply are not qualified to tell a professor what they should change.

Research Question

How does the course evaluation system at East Texas Baptist University affect professors and students in the School of Teacher Education and the School of Behavioral Sciences?

Limitations

Because I am a student at this university, I am limited to the amount of information I have on ETBU's course evaluations. I can only see the questions on the evaluations, and I do not have access to the results, or data collected from the evaluations.

I am also limited in my study due to the fact that I plan to interview students and professors only from the Department of Teacher Education and the Department of Behavioral Sciences. I choose to use these departments due to the fact that it is a convenience sample of students and professors from two of the larger departments on campus. While this is not a campus-wide examination of how professors and students view course evaluations, this will give me sufficient data to formulate an overall concept regarding how course evaluations are viewed in these two departments.

My personal biases also limit me for the purposes of this study. I am a student and I do have preconceived notions about course evaluations. Being an education major also may influence my opinion in that I view course evaluations as a useful tool for educators to improve their quality of teaching, and for the university to make improvements as well.

Due to the increasing emphasis on the importance of course evaluations, I have focused my literature search on research and studies done only in the past ten years (2001-2011), so my research is as current as possible but will not include significant studies published before 2001.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the process and impact of the current East Texas Baptist University course evaluation system in the Department of Teacher Education and the Department of Behavioral Sciences. Due to the overwhelming significance and importance placed on course evaluations in the world of higher level academia, the process and the affective impact of course evaluations deserves attention.

Literature Review

History and Development of Course Evaluations

Course evaluations have evolved over the past 80 years. While today they are used for such purposes as determining student satisfaction and evaluating whether or not professors are doing their jobs, this was not the original intent of course evaluations. Student evaluation of teaching, also known as SET, was first introduced in the 1920s (Algozzine et al., 2004; Anderson, Cain, & Bird, 2005; Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Pinto & Mansfield, 2010). Course evaluation forms were intended to provide professors with feedback in order to improve teaching and instruction (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; McCullough, 2008). The practice of giving students forms to evaluate their professors originated at Purdue University where Remmers and Brandenburg developed the Purdue Rating Scale for Instructors (Algozzine et. al, 2004). After their debut, course evaluations remained untouched for many years. However, this began to change in the 1960s.

Students began to realize that they had a voice, and that when they joined together their voice was heard. Lord (2008) states “evaluations of instructors and courses became more about student satisfaction than about a professor’s instructional effectiveness” (p. 73). After this drastic change regarding the purpose of course evaluations, research began in the 1970s on the validity and utility of these evaluations (Algozzine et. al, 2004). Since the 1970s, course evaluations have morphed into a tool that is used in determining student success, professor quality, and decisions regarding tenure or promotion. Most of the questions on modern course evaluations are centered on student satisfaction (McCullough, 2008). Due to the development of the Internet and the increased use of technology, student evaluations are heading into the virtual realm, and are becoming more widely used (Thorpe 2002).

Student Perceptions of Course Evaluations

While students may be the prime source of information about how professors could improve or changes that should be made to a course, their response to a course evaluation may not be the best resource. According to Glenn (2010), “For students, the act of filling out those forms is sometimes a fleeting, half-conscious moment” (para. 2). This means that for some students course evaluations are just another task to be completed, and little to no attention is paid to the process. Is it fair to equally weigh the evaluations of students who thoughtfully complete them with those which are carelessly completed (Beyers, 2008)? In 2009, the Texas Legislature enacted House Bill 2504, which requires every public college to post professors’ evaluation scores online (Glenn, 2010; Glenn, 2011; H.B. 2504; Mangan, 2010). This would mean that current students, as well as prospective students, would have a clear view of what each university’s ratings

and standards are, as well as individual professor's ratings (Mangan, 2010). This illustrates that course evaluations will only continue to grow in impact on how students choose their classes and even which college they choose to attend.

Research has shown that students tend to evaluate their professors in two main ways: according to the cognitive aspects of instruction or the personal traits of the professor (Care, 2009; Slate, LaPrairei, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Slate et al. (2005) defined cognitive aspects of instruction as the "teaching characteristics and instructional practices" (para. 2). Student evaluations "can be affected by student prior subject interest, workload difficulty, expected grade, reason for taking course, class level, overall grade point average, year in school, course enrollment, and teacher rank" (Serdyukova, Tatum, & Serdyukov, 2010, p. 182). Students' responses to evaluations can be swayed by many factors and experiences (Glenn, 2011). Overall, research shows that students tend to express their biases and emotions through course evaluations, and this may not allow them to be the most qualified for evaluating teaching characteristics or personal traits of professors. According to Lord (2008), "Undergraduates generally have a vision of how college teaching is conducted from depictions in movies or hearing tales from former students" (p. 74). Apparently, many college students are going into course evaluations with the wrong idea of what good teaching really is.

Researchers state that course evaluations are intended to judge student satisfaction (Cavanaugh, 2009; Glenn, 2010; Lord, 2008; Serdyukova et al., 2010), but what if students are not answering the evaluations correctly or applying any effort in the process? Apparently "on large campuses, it's statistically certain that at least one student will use

[course evaluations] to write a limerick that rhymes ‘exam’ and ‘scam’” (Glenn, 2010, para. 1).

On the other end of the spectrum, some students do take student course evaluations seriously, and offer their best answers to the questions. Serdyukova et al. found that “Students appreciate instructors who know what they are talking about and who also care about them” (2010, p. 183). Students might view their favorite subjects or professors or classes in which they received a high grade as worthy of feedback and therefore will put forth more effort to fill out an evaluation (Cavanaugh, 2009; Serdyukova et al., 2010; Risser, 2010; Thorpe, 2002). Professor Stanley Fish, the dean emeritus at the University of Illinois states, “Student evaluations of their professors are impacted heavily by student perception” (as quoted in Lord, 2008, p. 73). Researchers have found that some students enjoy being challenged and “show contempt for undemanding courses and cite challenging professors as most effective” (Slate et al., 2009, p. 62). How students respond to course evaluations can greatly depend on interest in the subject, how difficult the subject matter was, or even the motivation of the student (Serdyukova et al.).

Professor Concerns About Course Evaluations

According to Moriarty (2009), “student evaluations paint a fairly accurate picture of a professor” (para. 4), but this is only one of a few studies that I have found which make this assertion. The remaining bulk of my research suggests that professors’ opinions of course evaluations are, at best, divided. Serdyukova et al. (2010) state that there are “various views and interpretations of the value of student evaluations” (p. 180). Ken Bain, the author of What the Best College Teachers Do, as cited in Glenn (2010)

states that, “everyone agrees that course evaluations by themselves are inadequate” (para. 32). While professors do find student feedback and evaluation helpful to improving teaching, evaluations may not be the best form for providing this information (Obenchain, Abernathy, & Wiest, 2001). Professors are often criticized and critiqued on these evaluations by students beyond what anyone would normally say to someone in person. Due to a certain amount of anonymity given through course evaluations, students may feel free to strongly criticize professors and even seek vengeance. Lord (2008) shares a story of a new professor at a university who taught rigorous courses in biology, premedical, pre-veterinarian, and pre-dental majors. Dissatisfied with the challenging level of her classes, disgruntled students “took revenge on the instructor by ridiculing her teaching and lambasting the difficulty of the classes” (p.73). It seems that some professors must constantly worry about whether or not their courses will receive poor ratings due to the workload or difficulty of the course. No wonder “many [professors] find the concept of evaluations toxic” (Glenn, 2010, para. 2).

In response to the anxiety and fear produced by the thought of course evaluations, researchers are finding that professors have started to alter the level of their courses (Cavanaugh, 2009; Glenn, 2010; Lord, 2008; Serdyukova et al., 2010). “[A] survey of faculty found 70% of professors believe that their grading leniency and course difficulty bias student ratings, and 83% admitted making their course easier in response to student evaluations” (Lord, 2010, p. 73) These statistics show the effects of professors’ apprehensions about bad course evaluations. Serdyukova et al. (2009) found that “student evaluations encourage professors to dumb down courses in an effort to keep students happy at all costs, which results in lower academic rigor and decreased learning

outcomes” (p. 182). In a sense, this means that students have basically begun to blackmail professors for good grades by threatening poor evaluation ratings. Lord (2008) concludes, “lenient grading is the most frequently used faculty strategy to counter abusive student assessment” (p. 73). The brutality of course evaluations has caused professors to question teaching techniques and strategies. In fact “ many instructors [are] reluctant to try new teaching techniques because they feared their course evaluation ratings might decline” (Glenn, 2010, para. 11). In summary, Lord (2008) makes the claim that “When the driving mechanism for faculty evaluations shifts from educating to pleasing, many problems occur” (p. 73). Because of the emphasis placed on them by the universities in crucial decisions on raises, tenure, and promotion, faculty live in fear of a bad course evaluation.

One of the greatest aspects of concern for course evaluations to university professors is that the results of their evaluations often play a crucial role in faculty decisions (Algozzine et al., 2004; Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; McCullough, 2008; Obenchain et al., 2001; Thorpe, 2002). Professors face the fear of bad evaluations due to the fact that “these mechanisms play a critical role in the academic life since they are crucial in the promotion and tenure processes” (Driscoll & Cadden 2010, p. 21). Some professors live in apprehension of course evaluations and worry that their ratings will cost them their jobs. According to Glenn (2010), “for instructors whose careers can live and die by student evaluations, getting back the forms is an hour of high anxiety” (para. 2).

Therefore, the bulk of current literature on this topic suggests, “student evaluations have their limits. They should never be the only means of evaluating faculty

members” (Serdyukova et al. 2010, p. 182). Based on these findings the current state of course evaluations in the world of higher-level education is dangerously in need of attention.

Method

Procedure

For the purpose of this study, I will be using qualitative data to provide insight into course evaluations at ETBU. I will use this data to look for themes and patterns that I find through open-ended interviews conducted with students and professors, my journal entries addressing those interviews, and follow-up questions to the interviews. After requesting and receiving Human Subjects approval for the interview process and protocol, including the questions that will be asked of the interview participants, the following research method will be implemented. A sample list of interview questions can be found in the appendix. Using this process will allow for increased and prolonged attention to the observations, which produces a better understanding of the results. Because this study is done in a qualitative manner, I will use descriptive words and phrases for my data instead of numbers.

I will present my findings to the University in a chapel presentation or at the Education Research fair held each semester. I will provide information on the results of the interviews and the impact course evaluations at ETBU have on both the professors and students.

Sampling

Purposeful sampling will be used for this study. I have chosen this form of sampling because I have access to the information and can personally interact with

participants. This form of sampling will allow specific insight into the process of course evaluations in two departments here at ETBU. This study is a four semester long process with the data collection taking place mainly in the fall semester of the 2011-2012 school year.

Setting

East Texas Baptist University (About ETBU) is a small, private liberal arts university located in Marshall, Texas. Approximately 1200 students attend ETBU, and about 85% of those students live on campus. The average student to faculty ratio is 16:1, and each class has about 20 students. Due to the small size of the school, most professors know all of their students by name and see them outside of class around campus. Professors at ETBU are required to have ten office hours each week set aside for helping students outside of class. Of the full-time professors at this university, 85% have earned a doctorate or terminal degree. East Texas Baptist University focuses on integrating faith into academic learning, and according to the 2009 mission statement the school is “committed to Christian stewardship and to providing and maintaining an environment conducive to learning, leadership development, and academic excellence.” Another characteristic that distinguishes ETBU from other small liberal arts colleges is that students are required to attend chapel services twice a week, and must take six hours of religion courses to graduate. Many professors incorporate faith into the classroom by beginning class with a prayer, assigning scripture readings, or applying Christian themes to the course topic. ETBU’s top majors are Teacher Education, Business, Psychology, Kinesiology, Biology, and Religion.

Participants

I will interview two professors from the Department of Teacher Education at ETBU. I will also interview two professors from the Department of Behavioral Sciences. These professors will represent the other professors in their departments. I will interview two or three students from each professor's classes. To protect the participants of this study, I will use pseudonyms when referencing them to allow for anonymity. The students who participate in this study will represent the average student in these two departments. According to ETBU's 2010-2011 Fact Book, the total enrollment of students is 1197. The top ethnicities represented are White, African American, and Hispanic/Latino. Of the 1197 students, 49.6% are male and 50.4% are female. The average age of ETBU students is between 15 and 21. Most students (around 60%) state that their religious affiliation is Baptist.

Data Collections**Interviews**

Interviews will be conducted with all professors and students participating in this study. I will construct my interview questions from the anecdotal concerns that I have noted earlier in the paper as well as themes present in the literature that I have found. My questions will be open-ended and will be designed to encourage student and professor response. Each interview will only last 10-15 minutes. After conducting the interviews, I will look for common themes in the responses.

Journal Entries

A journal will be kept in response to the interviews that are conducted. This journal will aid me in analyzing statements from the interviews as I begin to classify themes. Subsequent interviews will be conducted and analyzed in the same way. I will be looking for common statements, opinions, or beliefs that appear in either the interviews with the professors or the students. These journal entries will provide an insight into subjects or issues that should be addressed in the follow up questions.

Follow Up Questions

After having conducted all of my interviews and identified themes by keeping journal entries, I will create follow up questions to help address further research or to clear up any confusion on statements made during the interview process.

Bias

I will use open-ended questions, member checking, and seeking out negative cases in attempt to remove my bias in this study. To provide member checking for this study, I will have the members of my committee review and look at the interviews conducted and my journal entries, in addition to asking the interviewee to confirm my understanding of their responses.

Data Triangulation

Throughout the study I will use data triangulation to cross check my information and results. Burke (1997) states that data triangulation is cross checking data and results through the use of multiple measures and sources. To achieve data triangulation, I will use my journal entries, interview responses, and follow up questions. By searching for

common codes among my three data sources, I will be able to be more confident in the identification of themes that emerge from the data.

Validity

In this study, member checking, low inference descriptors, and seeking out negative cases are used in attempt to validate my information. Member checking (McMillian & Schumacher, 1997) is the process of insuring that interview responses are being recorded accurately and that the respondent's intended answer is being understood. I will ask each interviewee to clarify answers and check to make sure my understanding of their response is correct. The use of low inference descriptors (McMillian & Schumacher, 1997) means that I will be sure to use precise wording in my interview questions and include only words that can have one meaning. Also, in the recording of my observations, I will be very specific and include literal, detailed descriptions. Finally, I will also look for negative cases or discrepant data to insure that proper themes and patterns are discovered through my data collection. (McMillian & Schumacher, 1997).

Data Analysis

The Constant Comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) will be used to analyze my data for this study. I will look for recurring themes and patterns in both the interview responses and journal entries. I will use a process of coding to identify such themes and patterns. I will begin by looking for broad codes or themes and as the research and data collection goes on I will begin to exclude information and narrow the themes to find precise categories and patterns. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), the process of categorizing data is to create temporary categories in which data apparently relates to the same content. Categories of data and themes will evolve during analysis as

decisions are made about where data should be assigned (Dye, 1993). Keeping a journal of themes found through interviews will keep track of the changes and alterations made to the themes during analysis. This process of data analysis could be compared to the act of looking into a Kaleidoscope. At the beginning of data collection and analysis the data will appear like the bits of colors found in a kaleidoscope. Through refinement the bits of color, or data, are changed into what looks like a well-defined pattern, and then finally appear as a clear, easily seen pattern at the completion of the data analysis (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000).

Results

After a detailed analysis of the data, multiple themes emerged:

- The majority of students and professors interviewed claimed that course evaluations need improvement.
- While professors are interested in students' responses to course evaluations, professors stated that the results are challenging to read and interpret.
- ETBU professors in the Behavioral Sciences and Teacher Education department read their results and implement changes based on comments, but some students voiced concern over whether or not changes are made.
- Students fill out course evaluations; however, there are a variety of reasons as to why.

Each of these themes will be discussed further along with supporting evidence and explanation.

Improvements to Course Evaluations

While conducting interviews with both professors and students I noticed a recurring theme of suggested changes to improve course evaluations. Professors stated that they want evaluations to give them a better idea of what students are learning from their courses instead of just comments or ratings of their performance as a professor. One professor expressed, “I think we need questions that revolve more around student engagement rather than my presentation”. (Pro. A. I p.2, September 16,2011). When asked what questions they would like to see on a course evaluation Professor B stated that they would want to know “Did they learn any content? And have they learned an attitude about thinking”(I p. 3, September 16, 2011). Professor D even suggested having students fill out evaluations after they have graduated and started a job so that they can say how they used what they learned while taking the course (I p. 2, September 16, 2011).

Students suggested there be questions on teaching styles, whether or not faith is demonstrably integrated into the course, recommendations for the professor, and even questions that ask whether or not you would take a course with the same professor again. When asked about how course evaluations could evolve and change Student C stated, “I think that it can’t really get worse so it’s gonna improve” (I p. 2, September 16, 2011).

While conducting my interviews, I noted in my journal how many of the students found that course evaluations are not a one size fits all type of evaluation. According to Student D, “... the questions are too generic cause like when you may have a history class and the questions are the exact same as a math class and there’s no way that you can teach them the same way so the questions in my opinion shouldn’t be the same

questions” (I p. 2-3, September 27, 2011). Other students, such as Student A, suggested that they should become more “personal for each like each...department”(Stu. A. I p.2, September 20, 2011). Professors also noted that there are some questions on course evaluations that are calculated into their scale which they have no control over either. Professor D stated, “many of the evaluations statements are not in the control of the professor, such as classroom lighting. I think if those questions are necessary they should be in a separate section that doesn’t impact the total evaluation scores” (Pro. D. FQ).

The data shows that both professors and students see a necessity for course evaluations to be altered and improved from how they are currently implemented at ETBU. Professor C summed up his/her impression of the improvements that need to be made to course evaluations by stating, “They really do need to evolve. I mean they need a lot of work. I think they need a lot of help in order to be more effective” (I p. 1, September 16, 2011).

Reading Evaluation Results

All of the professors interviewed mentioned the scaled question results and how challenging they are to read and interpret due to the fact that the rating scale changes throughout the evaluation and that their results are reported in a document filled with challenging statistical data. Professor B stated,

“You know the course evaluations consist of a bunch of questions that you answer on a three or four point scale and as far as those I just glance at them. They are a little confusing because it’s a four point scale for a while and then it switches to a three point scale so it used to

startle me when all the sudden my ratings got real low down at the bottom.” (Pro. B I p. 1, September 16, 2011)

Other professors voiced concern over not being able to understand or interpret their results. Professor A claimed that the “statistical analysis side is maybe a little bit confusing to several people” (I p. 1, September 16, 2011) and that the main thing he/she focuses on is the comments section. Professor C also echoed concern with the comment “The math makes it pretty hard. They are very complicated” (I p. 2, September 16, 2011). When answering a question about how he/she would specifically like course evaluations to change, Professor B stated “I would like for all the questions to be on the same point-scale, and for the summary statistics to be simpler, since I don’t understand them as they are now” (Pro. B FQ). Data shows that the results for professors are not easy to understand and therefore, probably are not being utilized as well as they could be.

Results Are Read, but Are Changes Made?

According to the answers given to both interview questions and follow-up questionnaires, professors in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and the Department of Teacher Education read their course evaluations. Some professors interviewed even expressed an interest in what students have to say. One professor states that he/she tries to “look for the negative stuff, like things that I could do better and ways to improve” (Pro. C I. p. 1, September 16, 2011). Professor A reported, “the comments that I get from students I really do take to heart”(I p. 1, September 16, 2011). It appears that the professors in these departments appreciate what students have to say and look for areas that need improvement or modification in their courses. “What catches my eye really are the comments and I always look at the comments and sometimes they reinforce what I

was already thinking or what students have said in class” (Pro. B. I p. 2, September 16, 2011), states Professor B.

Students had differing views on the impact of their course evaluations. Five out of eight students interviewed were either unsure of the impact of their responses or stated that their responses had little to no impact. Some students did not seem to think professors considered their suggestions, or made changes to courses because of comments on course evaluations. Student D commented “I really don’t know if they have any [impact] to be honest with you because I’ve had professors time and time again and nothing changes” (Stu. D I. p. 2, September 27, 2011). When I asked Student F about the impact that he/she thought their evaluations had he/she stated, “I really do not know at all because I feel like I’ve done them before and then I see the same thing over and over again” (Stu. F. I. p. 1, September 27, 2011). Other students affirmed that their responses might have had an impact, but that they really had not seen any changes because of them. When Student C was asked about whether or not he/she thought professors looked at or used his/her results the response was: “I know some of them do but I think that ones, the ones that have been here for a while, that they just kind of have what they do each year and it’s not going to change” (Stu. C. I. p. 2, September 27, 2011). When Student F was asked if he/she had seen any improvements or changes to courses based on comments made on course evaluations he/she simply stated, “I really don’t know” (Stu. F. I p. 1 September 27, 2011).

However, three students did state their evaluation responses had an impact and that they had seen changes because of comments made on evaluations. Student E stated, “I know in like talking to one of my professors... that they actually read them and they...

take into consideration the things that we say, so I think they have a big impact” (Stu. E. I p. 1, September 27, 2011). Student A expressed, “If I really have something to say, then I feel like they are paid attention to and things are changed” (Stu. A. I p. 2, September 20, 2011). The point of change occurring because more than one student made a comment about something was brought up by Student B when he/she stated “I think it’s when multiple people have the same issue or comment about a class is when I’ve seen change happen within classes” (Stu. B. I p. 2, September 20, 2011). While professors may be interested in reading student comments, students expressed a variety of answers on how much impact they believe they have and the level of effect they have seen due to their responses.

Students Fill Out Evaluations

Responses to interview questions about filling out evaluations demonstrated that all eight students that were interviewed filled out course evaluations. However, the reasons which motivated students to respond to evaluations varied. Seven out of eight students interviewed claimed that they fill out evaluations because of the extra credit they are awarded for doing so. When asked why he/she fills out evaluations Student C answered, “Mainly for the... extra credit that you get” (Stu. C I. p. 1, September 27, 2011). Student E responded to the same question with, “I fill them out because most professors offer like five or two points extra on the final” (Stu. E I. p. 1, September 27, 2011). Student G also stated, “Most of the time its because my teachers say ‘Hey I’m gonna give you some extra points on your test!’” (Stu. G I. p. 1, September 26, 2011). Interviews with students proved that a majority of the students, at least in the Behavioral

Sciences and Teacher Education departments, fill out course evaluations because they are receiving extra credit.

Another reason students stated that they fill out course evaluations was to inform professors of problems they had with the course(s). According to Student B, the purpose of course evaluations is to “help improve how the courses are taught”(Stu. B I. p. 1, September 20, 2011). Student C responded that they comment on negative aspects of a class that need to be addressed. “Normally just negative [comments], like I’ll... rate them honestly but I will say if it’s negative what I think would need to be changed or fixed” (Stu. C I. p. 1, September 27, 2011). Student A discussed why he/she fills out evaluations saying, “[If] there were things in the class that could have been done differently that... would make it more effective” (Stu. A I. p. 1, September 20, 2011).

Analysis of the student interview responses indicated that students in the Behavioral Science and Teacher Education departments respond to course evaluations to encourage professors. When discussing reasons for filling out course evaluations, Student D stated, “I actually like telling professors when they do a good job” (Stu. D I. p. 1, September 27, 2011). Student E also said “If I really like a professor, I like to encourage them or let them know that I liked them” (Stu. E I. p.1, September 27, 2011). Student G commented saying, “Sometimes I do like... I had one professor, I’ll just say Dr. Coppinger, and I loved him and he needs some good feedback, so he can still be here and stuff” (Stu. G I. p.1, September 26, 2011). Students seemed interested in communicating with their professors and sending them positive feedback and encouragement through their responses to course evaluations.

Discussion

This limited study affirmed the significance of the impact course evaluations have on professors and students. After researching the history of course evaluations, professors' concerns with evaluations, and students' perceptions of evaluations and completing interviews and follow up questionnaires with the professors and students in the Behavioral Sciences and Teacher Education departments, the importance of course evaluations continues to be apparent.

While this study did not focus on the actual instrument used at ETBU for course evaluations, a major concern of both professors and students appeared to be the effectiveness of the instrument. Professors voiced concern over the fact that there are not questions that assess whether or not students learned the content. Another aspect of evaluations professors were unsatisfied with stems from the fact that some of the questions on the evaluation currently evaluate elements beyond their control, such as lighting in the classroom. Professors were also unhappy with how their scores are reported. If professors are unable to read and interpret their results, it is probably safe to say that they are not being utilized to the fullest extent. The professors interviewed were interested in improving their courses and wanted to find specific areas they should improve in, but are unable to interpret the results presented to them. Because of this, the comments that professors receive on course evaluations end up being weighted more heavily. Perhaps it would be beneficial to provide either some form of training to professors regarding how to read and interpret their results, or to provide an accompanying instruction form along with the results to deliver help to professors when they are reading their results. I propose to the university that it would be beneficial to find

another tool or instrument to use for course evaluations. I would recommend finding an instrument that reports results in an easy to read, simplistic format. Another proposition for the university that I have identified after having analyzed the results from my study, would be to ensure that the questions that are responded to are both equal in their scale, or in other words all questions are responded to on the same scale, and also that the questions which do not apply to the course should not be calculated into the professor's results. How the results are reported needs to be addressed and requires further analysis.

Students also expressed concern with the current instrument used for course evaluations at ETBU. Students commented on how changes need to be made to evaluations that would perhaps make the evaluations more specific towards the course being evaluated. Students shed light on the fact that not all courses are taught in the same format so how can they all be analyzed with the same instrument? Because I have not done extensive research on this aspect of course evaluations, I cannot offer an expert opinion, however, I would suggest that ETBU look into the possibility of having each department on campus determine questions that would be specific for their discipline to be placed on course evaluations. By allowing the professors who actually teach the content to determine the questions on course evaluations, there would be a higher possibility that the results would provide better insight into what content students actually learned and specific improvements that should be made for the courses that would better teach the content. Similar to what students stated in their interviews, many different courses are offered at ETBU, and they all require different forms of teaching, so why not assess them differently to better fit the needs of the students and teachers? Further research on this aspect of course evaluations needs to be addressed as well.

While preparing for this study, I found studies that painted course evaluations to be a dreaded aspect of a college professor's career, however, the findings of this study revealed that professors in the Behavioral Sciences and Teacher Education departments at ETBU found evaluations to be a useful form of feedback, even though they need some improvements. After considering these results, I began to wonder if this might be due to the environment at ETBU. Because it is a small university, a strong sense of community exists on campus. The overall population of the university is smaller than others, and the professor-to-student ratio is also small. Because of these variables, I think students tend to encourage their professors, and professors look for comments from their students. Another possible explanation for these results could be the fact that ETBU is a Christian university as well. Because of the strong presence of Christian themes and values and the integration of faith in learning, perhaps more brotherly love and a sense of caring is displayed between students and professors than at other universities. Added insight into this possibility could be found through a study of the impact of Christian values on the results of course evaluations.

The results of this study showed that students mostly fill out course evaluations for the extra credit that is provided in return. While collecting research found in the literature review for this study, no significant studies were found that were in favor of this practice or against it. It should also be noted that from the students' responses, I gathered most professors in the Behavioral Sciences and Teacher Education departments only give a few points, which would not be enough to have a major impact on a student's grade. This data proved to be of little concern for the overall impact course evaluations served.

After a detailed analysis of the results in this study, attention should be paid to the fact that the course evaluation process and the impact of course evaluations on the Behavioral Sciences and Teacher Education departments are both effective and strong. Students in these two departments respond to course evaluations, although not always in a detailed, specific response. Students want to inform their professors about ways to improve, things that did not go well in the class, and aspects of the course that they liked or found helpful. The study did not yield results of students taking vengeance on professors or trying to harm professors. Professors read student responses and implement changes, although those changes are not always noticed by students. Professors did not seem fearful or upset about the use of course evaluations, nor did they suggest that course evaluations should not be used. The professors stated that they found course evaluations to be useful and they offered specific suggestions about how to make them more so, such as easier to read results, questions that assessed content learned, and questions that are equally weighted.

This study did present some limitations. The fact that the researcher was a student may have caused professors to be selective in their responses. Professors were informed that confidentiality would be maintained, but they may still have felt uncomfortable discussing course evaluations and their opinions of them with a student. If this study were to be conducted again it may help to have the researcher or the person conducting the interviews not be a current student. Another limitation stemmed from the responses to follow up questionnaires. I was able to conduct face-to-face interviews with four professors and eight students. However, I only received back answers to questionnaires

from two of the professors and six of the students. If the study were to be replicated, it is suggested to conduct follow up face-to-face interviews instead of written questionnaires.

Conclusion

The use of and emphasis placed upon course evaluations at higher-level education institutions are increasing. This study looked at the impact course evaluations have at East Texas Baptist University on both the students and the professors of the Teacher Education and Behavioral Sciences departments. The results indicated that while course evaluations may be an area of high tension and stress at other universities, at East Texas Baptist University they are viewed as a useful instrument that is capable of providing information and feedback from students to professors. Most students view them as a way to communicate with their professors either in a positive or negative way, and to earn a few points of extra credit in the course. Professors seek to find ways to improve their courses, and assessments of how much of the content students learned from their course. Both students and professors provided detailed suggestions about ways to advance the effectiveness of evaluations and hopefully changes can be implemented to improve the current evaluation system. Course evaluations are an important way for administration, professors, and students to see what exactly is taking place during the school year at ETBU, and will more than likely continue to be utilized and implemented at the end of each semester. This study provided insight into the impact and importance that course evaluations actually have on the professors and students in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and the Department of Teacher Education at East Texas Baptist University and will, hopefully, serve as a source of information to anyone seeking to revamp our institutional system in the near future.

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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions:

General questions for students:

- Age?
- Classification?
- Gender?
- Major?

General questions for professors:

- What school do you teach in?
- How long have you taught at ETBU?
- Gender?
- Number of classes currently taught at ETBU?

Student specific questions:

- Do you fill out course evaluations? If so why?
- What impact do you think your course evaluation responses have?
- Do you think there have been improvements or changes to courses based on comments you have made on course evaluations?

Professor specific questions:

- How do you view course evaluations?
- What impact do you think course evaluations have on your teaching?
- Have you altered your classes or teaching strategies based on course evaluations?
If so, how?

Questions for both students and professors:

- How do you see course evaluations evolving in the next ten years?
- If you could choose a question to be placed on a course evaluation, what would you choose?