

COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES
AGGREGATE DATA POLICY FOR STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS

Teaching by its very nature is idiosyncratic. It is often difficult for faculty and administrators to assess accurately the quality of teaching: as Potter Stewart said about obscenity, we “know it when we see it.” An excellent teacher strives for information that can inform his or her efforts to answer questions such as: Which methods worked well in this course? Which did not? Was the course set at too high a level or too low a level? Were the learning objectives met? Was student performance evaluated fairly and reasonably? Course evaluations can be seen in this context as an opportunity for individual faculty to assess their own teaching. In fact, such use in the continual improvement of teaching ought to be the primary function of course evaluations.

Course evaluations also are used prominently in the evaluation process for faculty. They are read and commented upon each year by appropriate administrators as well as by the faculty member under evaluation. The recent adoption of common questions across the College and a new method of their delivery have led to further questions regarding these evaluations. The following paragraphs attempt to address many of these issues by outlining appropriate uses of course evaluations, developing rules for the use of data deriving from the evaluations, and discussing issues concerning the online nature of the evaluation instrument.

Uses of course evaluations

As noted above, the primary purpose of course evaluations is to help the individual faculty member improve his or her teaching. When attempting to decide whether a use of evaluation data is valid, the first question that needs to be answered is whether the contemplated use of this data will improve the teaching of faculty in the College. If improvement of teaching is not the primary goal, then the use will not be allowed.

Faculty members should attach copies of all course evaluations to their annual reports, and it is expected that in the body of the report each faculty member will respond to these evaluations, offering context and noting how the evaluations could be used (or were or will be used) to improve their teaching. Faculty members should also include their course evaluations in their portfolios for tenure and promotion, once again including discussion of their content. Faculty discussion of the evaluations may include how students and faculty members interpreted individual questions on the instrument.

When course evaluations are used as part of the evaluation of teaching by evaluators other than the faculty member, they must be accompanied by other means of evaluating teaching. No decisions of the adequacy of a faculty member’s teaching should be made solely by reference to course evaluations. A comprehensive assessment of teaching should include other elements, including observations by peers and/or supervisors, evidence of work in improving one’s teaching, self-assessments on annual reports, and other methods of evaluation at the faculty member’s discretion. It should also be recognized that course evaluations are subject to known student biases, intentional or not, involving attitudes toward the course (required or not, general education or not, etc.), the instructor (gender, race, etc.), and so on. This

contributes to the need for judicious use of course evaluation data in the evaluation of faculty as but one of many factors informing the quality of an instructor's work.

Other uses for evaluation data involve aggregating the data across courses, instructors, or departments. These uses are addressed below.

Rules for data use in college course evaluations

"Data aggregation" refers to the collection of student responses to the course evaluations of more than a single instructor.¹ Since the college-wide course evaluation device includes a set of questions common to all sections of all courses in the college, it is possible to collect and to aggregate student response data from throughout the college, for either a given semester or across a range of semesters. For a given course evaluation question, such data could yield college-wide information, departmental information, or information about a course with multiple sections. Given the sensitive nature of such data, it is essential that the following guidelines be closely followed.

1. Data aggregation shall be the responsibility of the dean of Arts & Sciences or his/her designee.
2. Aggregated data may be of good use to college and departmental or program administrators as well as to instructors themselves in the continued pursuit of instructional improvement. In general, those having legitimate purpose in the use of aggregate data will be administrators, faculty, and staff charged with the supervision of educational programs within the college. Where aggregate data would reasonably support a legitimate instructional mission, and where such use carries little or no risk of harm to the instructors in question, data from within the supervisor's charge should be made available to him or her. For example, a department chair should have access to data aggregated from his or her department's courses.
3. The rights and welfare of individual instructors must be fully protected against improper use of aggregate data. The same applies to groups of instructors, for instance, instructors teaching a given course over a given period or instructors in a given program.
4. Course evaluation data are in general significant only within the context of the many factors shaping the instructional environment. The same applies especially to aggregate data, since the context from which aggregate data are drawn is even more complex than that of the single instructor.
5. Comparison of the given instructor's course evaluations with aggregate data may inform performance *evaluation* only in concert with the many conditions and considerations

¹ Faculty may aggregate and use data from their own classes in any way they choose at any time. Note that the collection of a single faculty member's course evaluations across course sections does not fall under the definition of aggregate data provided here.

making up the context of the instructor's teaching. Course evaluation data represent but a single element among the many informing instructor performance. The same applies where aggregates of data are compared, as for instance between one department and another.

6. The significance of student course evaluation data lies especially in the opportunity that it affords for performance *enhancement*. Comparison with data aggregates may occasion reflection upon or discussion of an instructor's teaching methods as a means of improving those methods. The instructor him/herself is thus encouraged to consider aggregate data in reviewing his/her course evaluations. However, all parties are reminded that where a set of marks are all outstanding, a position below the mean remains itself outstanding.
7. The College will routinely aggregate course evaluation data both for its own purposes and for the purposes of its department and program heads. Typically, this will include aggregates of all courses within a given department; all courses within a given course designator (e.g., BIOL, CHEM, etc.); courses with relatively numerous sections (e.g., WRIT101, BIOL150, HIST211, etc.); and courses having particular general education or graduation significance (e.g., courses satisfying the Constitution or Intensive Writing requirement, etc.).
8. The College will routinely share with department and program heads the aggregate data particular to those departments and programs. For the given department or program, this will typically include aggregates of the department's (or program's, etc.) courses; aggregates of departmental courses within a given course designator; aggregates of departmental courses with relatively numerous sections; and so on.
9. Aside from the use specified above (items 7 and 8), university administrators, faculty, and staff who seek access to college data aggregates should apply to the dean in writing (a "data request"). The data requested and the purpose for the request must be specified. Routine data aggregates may be shared by the dean at his/her discretion. Non-routine data aggregates may be shared by the dean at his/her discretion in consultation with the affected department or program heads.
10. At least once per year, the dean will make available to all CAS chairs and faculty a complete list of all data requests (as specified in item 9) submitted and granted.
11. In their use of aggregate data, all administrators, faculty, and staff must be scrupulous in adhering to these points. Misuse of aggregate data may constitute a significant failure in the individual's commitment to academic responsibility.
12. Administrators, faculty, and/or staff who believe that misuse of aggregate data has occurred (or is occurring, etc.) should bring the alleged misuse to the attention of the individual they believe misused the data. If the two parties are not able to reach an agreement about the appropriate use of data, the individual should bring the matter to the attention of the dean of Arts & Sciences. The dean is the final arbiter of the appropriate use

of data in the College, except in cases of the dean her/himself. If the dean is the alleged misuser, then the appeal should be made to the provost or his/her designee. Faculty who believe their department chair misused data when commenting on their annual report may use the appeals process for annual reports delineated elsewhere by the College.

13. While evaluations should remain private, it is possible that their content may be sought under the Freedom of Information Act. In such cases, the University would be required to release the evaluations. If evaluations are made public, the University and College should strive to protect the identity of the faculty member being evaluated. When this is not possible, the faculty member should be afforded the right to respond publicly in writing to the evaluations much as he or she would do in an annual report.
14. At a minimum, complete evaluation data for individual faculty should be stored by the faculty member and by the department for at least the time between successive major evaluations of the faculty member's performance. Aggregate data should be stored by the faculty member or administrator who requested the aggregation. All parties should ensure that their storage means are stable and secure.