

Midsemester Evaluations of Teaching: Strengthening Faculty Development in Rapidly Changing Times

Student evaluations are used at many higher education institutions to assess faculty performance and encourage self-reflection and improvement over time. However, because these evaluations typically come at the end of the semester, their potential to encourage faculty development can be diminished. Creating a midsemester assessment program can encourage a growth mindset in faculty, build transparency and rapport between faculty and students, and increase digital literacy.

What Do Faculty Members Think About Student Evaluations of Teaching?

In spring 2021, a focus group was scheduled at Chattanooga State Community College that allowed faculty to share their thoughts about student evaluations of teaching and how they hoped these evaluations could be used going forward. Faculty representing a variety of academic disciplines participated in this focus group. I began the facilitation of this focus group by asking the participants for their first impressions about the topic of student evaluations of teaching. In response to the neutrally worded prompt, most faculty responses indicated concern about these evaluations, on various bases (e.g., reaching a representative sample of students; interpreting and comprehending of the results of the evaluations, particularly complex quantitative results; and using student evaluations of teaching to make constructive changes to instruction).

Participants in the focus group steered much of the conversation toward ensuring that student evaluations of teaching are used to improve faculty development. A point of view shared by participants was the importance of specific and detailed information from students. Faculty were concerned that qualitative or quantitative questions that were met with short and simple responses (e.g., describing or ranking the class as “good” or “bad” with no examples) did not provide a way for faculty to improve their instruction. In addition, some faculty members were concerned about which students’ voices tend to be over- or underrepresented in the evaluations. One aspect of this bias was the likelihood that students having the most extreme viewpoints (whether greatly positive or greatly negative) would be more likely to respond rather than students perceiving the class or instructor as average. Another concern was that some students may be reluctant to provide specific suggestions for improvement because they were not accustomed to critiquing an authority figure.

Faculty were also concerned with the timing of student evaluations. Focus group participants expressed that in the rapidly changing educational landscape, they would like to have the opportunity to learn more about students’ experiences while the semester is in session, rather than only at the end of the semester.

Implementing a New Program

As a result of this focus group, I initiated a voluntary Midsemester Assessment Program for faculty. In this program, an online form was sent to full-time and adjunct faculty. Those who wanted midsemester feedback provided details about the type of feedback they wanted. I created anonymous forms for students that contained between three and six questions tailored to the topics on which each faculty member wanted feedback (e.g., class pacing, email communication, readings, learning management system, etc.). These were primarily qualitative questions based on the focus group participants’ interest in obtaining more specific details from students in evaluations. Faculty could then send the anonymous forms to their students and view their results online.

Overall, the Midsemester Assessment Program supported faculty and their students in three areas:

- Formative assessment
- TILT (Transparency in Learning and Teaching)
- Building digital literacy

Formative Assessment

Student evaluations of teaching that take place at the end of the semester provide an opportunity for students who have completed a course to assess their experiences with the instructor. These end-of-semester evaluations are more summative (evaluative) in nature (University of Washington Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021). In the focus group, faculty indicated an interest in opportunities for formative assessment (i.e., assessment designed for continuous improvement) in addition to this summative assessment.

Options for formative assessment are an important aspect of building a growth mindset, meaning the ability to see challenges as opportunities for development instead of failures. This growth mindset is particularly important as faculty continue to adjust to changes in course delivery that were triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the increased use of technologies (e.g., videoconferencing services, BlendFlex classroom setups, online learning management systems, library resources, etc.).

Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT)

Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) is a pedagogical framework focused on being transparent with students concerning lesson plans and purposes. TILT improves student engagement by helping students understand how an instructor's teaching contributes to learning goals, whether for the course specifically or for students' academic or career development. Midsemester evaluations fit into the TILT framework by initiating a connection between faculty and students with regard to how the classroom climate influences students' learning. This helps build rapport between faculty and students and ensures that students know the faculty member is working to set up the class for their benefit.

A challenge of TILT is that some students are accustomed to a teaching relationship where instructors do not feel the need to communicate the purposes for their behaviors to students (Kennesaw State University Digital Learning Innovations, n.d.). Regarding student evaluations specifically, instructors can encourage participation by discussing with students why student evaluations exist and how the instructor plans to use the anonymous feedback from students in order to improve the course. Engaging students in this way at the midsemester point can help students get acclimated to being active in their learning.

Building Digital Literacy (In Faculty and Students)

Both faculty and students have reported feeling overwhelmed as a result of changes in the educational environment during COVID-19 (Selwyn, 2020). Both groups have had to adapt to new developments in the types of technologies they need to use for class and the way these technologies fit into their lives (e.g., teaching or learning from one's home as opposed to on campus). Due to rapid technological growth and change, everyone needs to continue to build digital literacy skills, regardless of their age or educational level. Midsemester evaluations serve an important purpose for digital literacy because they enable students to share their experiences with technologies that may be new to them and the instructor. This helps faculty identify and address potential or existing problems with new technologies before they escalate.

Faculty are committed to quality teaching in an educational landscape that has been rapidly changing since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Midsemester evaluations are an inexpensive way to triangulate data on faculty performance and increase the options faculty have to improve their teaching during times of institutional, national, and global change.

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