

# Fundamental Principles of Course Evaluation

One of the most valuable methods by which students and faculty may collaboratively work to improve instruction in any educational endeavour is through formalized student feedback, namely course evaluations. While evaluations of the course are necessary to effective delivery and ongoing improvement of course content, the process by which evaluations are carried out is critically important. The integrity of the process is central to not only yielding valid results which authentically reflect the educational experience, but also to addressing vital moral and legal concerns. The asymmetric power relationship inherent in the student-teacher dyad is magnified further in medical education, and as such must be treated with care as a necessary fact of life.<sup>1</sup>

In an effort to enhance this process in a manner that is meaningful, clear, useful and safe for all involved, we offer the following principles which should be kept paramount when considering course evaluation systems:

***The Right to Anonymity.*** Students must be able to remain anonymous in order to decrease risk of positive or negative influence on future evaluations of the student's performance, whether in formal settings such as grading or letters of recommendation or in informal contexts. While non-anonymous evaluation mechanisms may be permitted, they should be considered optional and a parallel anonymous process should occur for *all* students. Anonymity should be the expected minimum standard.

This should not be construed to limit record-keeping in order to ensure that an evaluation was submitted. However, the name and the evaluation itself should be scrupulously separated in order to prevent later identification.

This also will permit students to safely express themselves in matters of opinion (of which course evaluations are an example), a matter covered under University policy<sup>2</sup> and also relevant to freedom of expression rights in both the state and federal constitutions. It will also encourage honest evaluation and appraisal of instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> This is clearly the spirit found in the *Compact Between Teachers and Learners of Medicine*. (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2002. Available at <http://www.aamc.org/newsroom/pressrel/compact.pdf>.)

<sup>2</sup> "Students should be free...to reserved judgment about matters of opinion." Code of Policies and Regulations Applying to All Students, Statement on Individual Rights (Section 2A), University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. ([http://www.admin.uiuc.edu/policy/code/section\\_1.html](http://www.admin.uiuc.edu/policy/code/section_1.html), accessed 27 April 2005.)

***The Right to Affirmatively Withhold Opinion.*** Students should be afforded the right to affirmatively not respond to evaluation questions for whatever reason. To require an opinion may result in responses which are either provided for the sake of response or in order to satisfy a perception about what would please those reading the evaluations.

This should not be construed to mean that students should not be required to make this decision through commission rather than omission. For example, under an electronic system a student may be required to log in and submit a blank evaluation rather than a system where something was not submitted due to a student simply not “getting around to it.” This right should be utilized due to principle, not laziness or circumstance.

***The Maintenance of Appropriate Physical and Temporal Distance.*** Responses to evaluations should be separated from administrative staff and faculty by both time and space. Evaluations should be submitted directly to locations outside of the departments in question and should not be made available until an appropriate amount of time has passed. In the case of small classes (such as clerkship rotations) where inadvertent identification of a student’s identity may take place, strong consideration should be made to the provision of evaluation data in aggregate after several rotations have occurred. The physical custody of paper materials or the integrity of electronic materials must be appropriately handled.

The above will further enhance the quality of the data by providing for substantial trust in the process. By providing for appropriate custody of the data by disinterested third parties (ideally a University office outside of COM, although a high-level UICOM office such as Educational Affairs may be appropriate) the level of student trust in the process will increase. The perception of possible problems with integrity will decrease through such measures.

***The Appropriate Timing of Evaluation Requests.*** While situations vary, the period during which students are requested to fill out evaluations for courses should be appropriately timed in order to allow for evaluation of all aspects of the course.

In some situations, students are asked to fill out evaluations “early”, and therefore have little opportunity to provide protected feedback relating to major activities occurring late in a course.

***Clear and Transparent Statements Regarding Procedural Integrity.*** A clear statement regarding the integrity of the evaluation process as well as the handling of the data should be made to the student body, as well as included with all evaluation materials. How this data is to be used should be made evident as well. Contact information in the event of a problem or concern should be provided as well. Contacts should include not only faculty or administrative contacts but an appropriate student representative as well.

Making a proper statement regarding the purpose of the evaluation process is important for allowing for honest, useful feedback. Assuring the integrity of the process is absolutely vital to proper evaluation. Allowing for a clear indication of appropriate individuals to direct concerns to will permit minor issues (including problems of perception rather than of substance) to be resolved appropriately rather than allowing them to grow.

***Appropriate Education of Faculty and Administrative Staff Regarding Evaluation.*** Faculty and staff should be made aware not only of these principles, but the underlying values and ethics behind them and encouraged to consider them in other aspects of their educational careers as well.

Without appropriate education and dissemination, the conceptual basis for these principles will be lost. Faculty and staff should appreciate the sound basis for evaluation procedures and not consider it to be bureaucratic effluent. A firm appreciation for the moral and legal principles involved will enhance the educational relationship.

We offer these in the spirit of encouraging a clear, consistent, and ultimately useful evaluation system through all courses. It is important to recognize that conflicts can result not merely at the point when grades are assigned, but at later points such as the writing of recommendation letters and the like. Any evaluation system which is utilized in the College should be scrutinized for how it interacts with these principles, and exception should only be made in the event of extraordinary need or situation.

Respectfully submitted.

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