Using Student Rating of Teaching (SRT) Results in Evaluating Teaching: A Guide for Department Heads, Chairs, and Review Committee Members

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End of semester information from the Student Rating of Teaching (SRT) survey remains an important tool for department chairs and heads in documenting student perceptions of teaching. The University’s policy on Evaluation of Teaching emphasizes that the SRT, in conjunction with other forms of peer evaluation of instruction, should be used for faculty tenure/promotion decisions and salary merit increases.

The Value and Use of SRT Data
SRT data are useful as a broad diagnostic tool to assess instructional quality. Because the data represent perceptions of instruction rather than an objective measure of student mastery of content or an expert assessment of quality teaching, their primary value is to describe how students are experiencing our courses.

What are Good Practices in Using SRT Data for Evaluation?
Avoid overinterpreting small differences in mean scores.
SRT scores vary from semester to semester even for the same course with the same instructor. Small differences in mean scores (e.g., 5.3 vs. 5.6) are not meaningful indicators of instructional quality or student satisfaction. Relying on small differences in average department scores is unreliable.

Instead, review differences in mean scores that are meaningful for your department context.
In addition to reviewing mean scores, departments should review the distribution of responses, standard deviations, and overall number of responses to get a fuller understanding of the data. If a majority of students rate survey item statements at or below “somewhat agree” (4.0) and if an instructor’s scores are consistently well below the department norm (e.g. one standard deviation or more), a closer review of the reasons for the scores is warranted.

- Avoid drawing inferences about instructors based on a few distinctive written comments.
  Evaluators and instructors alike often focus too heavily on a small number of written comments that do not reflect the overall course experience of the remaining students (Linse, 2017). These comments—positive or negative—may be memorable because of their novelty or emotional appeal, but a few distinctive comments alone should not be used to evaluate the overall quality of instruction.

- Instead, focus on the pattern of comments that reflects the consensus of the students in class.
  Student ratings comments should be understood to represent the collective views of a group of students (Linse, 2017, p. 102), not the specific views of a small number of students. Look for patterns in the data, regardless of focus. For example, a pattern showing unpreparedness or cancelled classes are signals that require follow-up.

- Avoid using SRT results disproportionately to assess teaching effectiveness.
  SRT results can have a disproportionate influence on how teaching is assessed (Linse, 2017. p. 100). This influence can lead evaluators to develop inaccurate judgements about the quality of faculty teaching. SRT results measure students’ perceptions of what they have learned toward the end of the term and do not assess subject matter knowledge of the instructor or student learning.

- Instead, use multiple measures to develop a comprehensive view of instruction
  This guide to implementing a peer review of teaching program in your department lists many additional information sources for documenting and assessing instructional effectiveness. These
sources both help faculty organize their teaching portfolios and encourage review committees to emphasize broader considerations of teaching besides student ratings.

**How Can I Address Issues of Bias in SRT results?**

Bias in SRT results occurs when students rate instruction lower if it does not conform to preconceived notions of how a college instructor should look or behave or how a course should be taught. While bias is likely to occur, it remains an open question whether rating biases “are strong enough to overwhelm the students’ ratings of the faculty member’s teaching…to solely reflect that bias” (Linse, 2017, p. 98).

**Reviewing quantitative results:** Consistently low scores are unlikely to be the sole result of rating bias. Rely on the best practices described above for interpreting rating scores and discuss potential rating biases with instructors upon request.

**Written comments:** In units where written comments on students’ ratings of teaching are shared with the unit head and/or reviewers, unfairly prejudicial comments (section B.6) can be withheld from consideration upon request of the instructor and accordingly will not be part of annual or other reviews.

**What Do University of Minnesota SRT Data Tell Us?**

On the Twin Cities campus, the mean for the five instructor items on the SRT was 5.34 (on a 6 point scale) with some minor differences between items (2017-2018 undergraduate data). Standard deviations for individual items ranged from .72-1.17. These data indicate that undergraduate students rate instructional effectiveness highly and that a majority of students either mark “agree” or “strongly agree” on these items.

![Figure 1. Distribution of scores using data from the 2017-2018 academic year (undergraduate courses, instructor items only). Y axis = course section N. This distribution curve is common in student rating results (Linse, 2017). Source: Office of Measurement Services](image)

**How Can I Learn More?**

You may wish to consult these resources:

- This white paper provides an overview of the current research findings including meta-analyses of SRT studies and practical advice on interpreting and using SRT results effectively.
- The University’s policy on evaluation of teaching.
- Tips for documenting and conducting peer review of teaching.
- Peer Review of Teaching

**What Resources Exist to Improve Teaching?**

The Center for Educational Innovation (CEI) recommends these low-risk, high-impact practices to improve teaching:

1. formative feedback through classroom assessment techniques using an appropriate subset of these techniques as needed
2. **midterm student feedback facilitation** by CEI staff
3. **1-1 consultations** with CEI staff on any instructional concern
4. direct assistance from a **guide** designed to improve SRT scores