

Rachael Barlow on Timing of Course Evaluations

One reason why Trinity students do not carefully complete online course evaluation forms is that we simply ask them to complete them at the wrong time of year. It is easy to get students to evaluate carefully when we ask them to do so during class. Then, the filling out of evaluations competes with only one alternative: whatever else the professor has planned for that day. But when students complete evaluations on their own time, evaluations then compete with whatever consumes students towards the end of the semester: finishing papers and exams, moving out of one's dorm, and making travel plans. The time at which our online course evaluation system currently opens and closes is a time at which our students are too distracted to evaluate with due attention. Withholding grades from students who have not completed evaluations may increase the likelihood of them completing evaluations, but it does not raise the quality of those evaluations.

When students control when they will do evaluations, many are likely to do so at much earlier and later points than Trinity's current system. Consider data from RateMyProfessors.com, a website to which students submit *on their own initiative* their evaluations of faculty. I extracted the evaluations of the fifteen professors at Trinity who have received the largest number of evaluations on this website.¹ Of the evaluations received by each professor, I pulled only those that were unique, deleting accidental double entries, and only those entered between 2004 and 2008. This left me with 322 evaluations for analysis. The only data that interested me for each evaluation was the day and month each evaluation appeared on the website. Using this data, I was able to determine the popular times of year for students to submit evaluations of faculty. The three line graphs on the next page show the same data aggregated at different levels: days, half-months, and months. These graphs show that while a good number of evaluations are entered in early December and early May, these are not the most popular times for submitting evaluations. More popular times are the entire months of November, January, and April, as well as late May.²

These data may suggest that a way to elicit more carefully-completed course evaluations is to expand *in both directions* the period during which students can complete those evaluations: both earlier in the semester and much later after the semester has closed. For instance, providing students with the opportunity to fill out evaluations in November might encourage students still "in the heat of the moment" to describe what that moment is like. Providing them with a January opportunity might allow students time during a relatively quiet period of the academic year to reflect upon their recent experiences. I imagine a system which is more fluid than the current one: students receive perhaps three automatic invites to complete evaluations between November and January and again between April and June, with the opportunity to continually edit their evaluations as time allows until an official closing of each form. Naysayers might argue that allowing students to do evaluations after the semester closes permits them to use the reception of their grades as the basis for evaluation. However, for as much evidence that exists to suggest a connection between a student's grade and his evaluation of a course,³ much evidence also exists to the contrary.⁴

¹ Range: 28 evaluations – 50 evaluations. Mean: 34.5 evaluations.

² I have underestimated the number of evaluations for late November and all of December; the 2008 data for these data are not included, since those periods had not occurred at the time of writing this document. Once these data have been added, I suspect the line graphs will do an even better job of proving my point.

³ For example, see Anthony C. Krautmann and William Sander, "Grades and Student Evaluations of Teachers," *Economics of Education Review* 18, no. 1 (1999), R.J. Gigliotti and F.S. Buchtel, "Attributional Bias and Course Evaluations," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 82, no. 2 (1990).

⁴ For example, see Kenneth A. Feldman, "Grades and College Students' Evaluations of Their Courses and Teachers," *Research in Higher Education* 4, no. 1 (1976), John A. Centra, "Will Teachers Receive Higher Student Evaluations by Giving Higher Grades and Less Course Work?," *Research in Higher Education* 44, no. 5 (2003).

