



## Assessment Bulletin

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Office of  
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# Student Evaluations of Teaching: A New Design for UMass Amherst

**SUMMARY** The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment and the Center for Teaching are pilot-testing a new University course evaluation form called the "Student Response to Instruction" (SRTI). It is a pre-printed, machine readable instrument with nine diagnostic items, three "global" items, and space for written comments and additional instructor or department questions. The validity and reliability of student ratings has been heavily researched, and 70 years of findings suggest that appropriately constructed and collected student ratings represent a valid indicator of teaching effectiveness.

During the 1991-1992 academic year, the Rules Committee of the Faculty Senate and the Provost's Office asked the Faculty Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning to review campus policies concerning the evaluation of teaching for personnel decisions and teaching improvement. Of particular interest to the Committee was an update to the nearly 20-year-old University form and process by which students rate instruction.

In response to this request the Committee (which became the Faculty Senate Council for Teaching, Learning, and Instructional Technology), the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA), and the Center for Teaching (CFT) have been working collaboratively on the development of a new University course evaluation form. The result of this effort is the "Student Responses To Instruction" or "SRTI" course evaluation form. This new form, currently in the second year of pilot-testing, is designed to provide useful feedback regarding students' experiences in the classroom.

This Assessment Bulletin provides an introduction to the SRTI form, including background information on its development and a discussion of the rationale behind survey item selection. In addition, this Bulletin addresses some of the questions commonly asked regarding the validity and reliability of student course evaluations. The box (p. 2) provides answers to these questions drawn from a large body of evidence (more than 1,500 references) dealing with research on student ratings of teaching.

It is important to point out that while this Bulletin focuses on the use of student course evaluations, student ratings of instruction are only one tool available for the evaluation of teaching. While students are appropriate judges of those aspects of teaching that reflect students'

experience with an instructor (e.g., student-instructor relationships, the instructor's ability to communicate clearly), they cannot effectively judge those aspects of a course that reflect a faculty member's subject matter expertise (e.g., knowledge in major field as reflected by course syllabus and reading list, selection of course objectives, selection of instructional materials). These elements of a course can best be evaluated by faculty members' peers. The Center for Teaching maintains a collection of materials on peer review and teaching portfolios for individual and departmental use.

### SRTI Design and Item Selection

Three goals guided item selection and question format for the SRTI form. The goals were to develop a student course evaluation instrument that:

1. Focuses on aspects of teaching that students are capable of judging and that are highly related to student learning and satisfaction;
2. Is appropriate for the wide variety of instructional styles and courses taught at UMass Amherst; and
3. Provides information for both the improvement of teaching and the evaluation of instructors for merit, promotion, and tenure purposes.

SRTI items were selected after an extensive review of the literature on student learning and teacher and course evaluation as well as an analysis of course evaluation practices on other campuses. The instrument includes nine diagnostic items, three global items, three student descriptors, extra response categories for individual or departmental items, and space for written comments.

**Diagnostic Items:** The SRTI contains nine items that reflect six teaching constructs important to facilitating

student learning and achievement: skill and clarity, course structure, teacher availability and rapport with students, feedback to students, classroom interaction, and stimulation of student interest (Astin, 1993; Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Centra, 1993; Marsh, 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Some examples of these items are: “the instructor explains course material clearly”, “the instructor provides useful feedback on your performance”, and “the methods of evaluating your work are fair.” Students’

responses to these items highlight specific strengths and areas for improvement in a teacher’s performance, as perceived by students. As such, these items primarily serve a formative evaluation purpose.

**Global Items:** The form also contains three global items which ask students about their overall evaluation of how much they have learned in the course, the effectiveness of the instruction, and rating of the course as a whole. Research has shown that overall or global items are the

### What Do Student Ratings Really Mean?

Student course evaluations represent one of the most heavily researched topics in the area of faculty evaluation. This research gives a number of relatively clear answers to questions regarding the usefulness of students’ ratings of instruction. (This section is an adaptation of three comprehensive reviews of the literature [Arreola, 1995; Cashin, 1995; and Davis, 1988].)

**Q** Are student ratings valid indicators of effective teaching?

**A** Ratings of overall teaching effectiveness are moderately correlated with independent measures of student learning and achievement. Students of highly rated teachers achieve higher final exam scores, can better apply course material, and are more likely to continue study in the subject. In addition, student ratings are correlated with other indicators of teaching competence, such as self ratings, peer ratings, expert judges’ ratings, graduating seniors’ and alumni ratings. All this evidence suggests that student ratings are valid indicators of teaching effectiveness.

**Q** Are student ratings consistent, or do they vary depending on when the evaluation occurs?

**A** There is very little variation in student ratings for an individual instructor regardless of whether the form is administered mid-semester or end-of-semester, to current students or to alumni. Moreover, an instructor’s ratings for a given course tend to be consistent over successive years.

**Q** Do student ratings vary depending on the characteristics of students, the instructor, and the setting?

**A** Ratings have been shown to have little or no relationship with students’ age, sex, grade-point average, and academic ability, and no consistent relationship has been found between ratings and class year (freshman, sophomore, etc.). No consistent relationships have been found between student ratings and the instructor’s sex, rank, or research productivity, nor have consistent relationships been found between student ratings and such variables as the amount of homework assigned or grading standards. Researchers have, however, reported the following tendencies:

- Elective courses tend to be rated higher than required courses, and ratings tend to be higher where the student had a prior interest in the subject matter.
- Regular faculty tend to receive higher ratings than graduate teaching assistants.

- Ratings can be influenced by class size (very small classes tend to receive higher ratings — although these findings are not entirely consistent), by discipline (humanities instructors tend to receive higher ratings than instructors in the social or natural sciences), and by type (discussion courses tend to receive higher ratings than lecture courses).
- Student ratings are correlated with the perceived difficulty of the course. Somewhat surprisingly, the correlation is positive, with students giving higher ratings to courses perceived as more challenging.

**Q** Aren’t students’ ratings really just popularity contests, reflecting an instructor’s ability to entertain students?

**A** Students give high ratings to teachers who are enthusiastic, well organized, and stimulating. However, the research also shows that students make distinctions between a teacher’s warmth, friendliness, and sense of humor and other characteristics of the teacher — praising teachers for their warmth, for example, but also criticizing them in other areas. These results suggest that students are able to discriminate between a faculty member’s presentation style and other elements contributing to instructional effectiveness.

**Q** Can students make fair, contemporaneous assessments of teaching, or will an instructor’s value be understood only with the passage of time?

**A** Students’ current and retrospective ratings tend to be consistent. There are strong positive correlations between students’ end-of-course ratings and ratings those same students give years later.

**Q** Are student ratings merely a reflection of how well the student is doing in the course?

**A** There tend to be positive but low correlations between student ratings and expected grades. Studies suggest that most of the correlation is accounted for by student learning (i.e., students who learn more earn higher grades and give higher ratings) and desire to take the course (i.e., higher motivation tends to result in both higher grades and higher ratings), rather than grading leniency.

**Q** To what extent are student ratings useful in improving instruction?

**A** While some studies are inconclusive, there is a general sense that instructors significantly improved their ratings when evaluations of teaching were used in conjunction with faculty development and teaching improvement consultation.

most highly correlated with student achievement and satisfaction. In addition, they are applicable and comparable among nearly all teaching and learning situations. Therefore, most sources agree that these are items of the kind that best support decisions related to teaching performance (summative evaluation purposes, such as tenure and promotion reviews) (Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Centra, 1993).

**Student Descriptors:** The SRTI form includes three student descriptors: whether students are taking the class as a required or elective course, the grade they expect to receive, and their class level. These items are included because they are variables suspected of biasing students' ratings.

**Additional Individual or Departmental Items:** In addition to these standard, all-campus, items, there is response space for up to eighteen individual or departmental questions. Departments or Schools and Colleges may want to use these extra response sets for items reflecting particular departmental or school goals. In addition, individual faculty members can use these response sets to include items that are more specific to the goals of particular courses.

**Written Comments:** On the reverse side of the SRTI form space is provided for students' written comments. Three questions are pre-printed: "What do you like most about this course and/or the instructor's teaching of it?"; "What about this course and/or the instructor's teaching of it needs change or improvement?"; and "What suggestions can you offer that would help make this course a better learning experience for you?" In addition, there is space for other comments.

### Processing the Form and Reporting Results

The SRTI is a pre-printed, machine readable form. The forms are scanned by UIS (the administrative data processing center) and reports are produced by the Office of Institutional Research (OIR). These reports, along with the original SRTI forms with written comments, are then returned to individual faculty members.

### Interpreting and Following-Up on Results

The SRTI form is designed to provide faculty members with information helpful to improving teaching performance and serve as one aspect of the information on teaching collected for promotion and tenure. The Center for Teaching and the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment have developed a pamphlet designed to help faculty members interpret their SRTI reports. In addition, the Center For Teaching can provide support as faculty members consider what their SRTI results tell them about

their teaching. The Center offers assistance in identifying articles and other resources on each core item, and several methods for getting additional feedback on one's teaching and students' learning.

### Next Steps and More Information

The SRTI is currently in the pilot-testing phase. Faculty members and departments interested in participating in the pilot phase or receiving more information on the SRTI form, SRTI results, or the administration and reporting process, should contact Martha Stassen in the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (545-5146 or [mstassen@acad.umass.edu](mailto:mstassen@acad.umass.edu)).

The Center for Teaching (545-1225 or [cfteach@acad.umass.edu](mailto:cfteach@acad.umass.edu)) is available to help individual faculty members or departments interpret SRTI results and develop strategies for responding to the information these results provide. The Center also has additional information on the appropriate uses of student course evaluations for both improving and evaluating teaching.

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## **Faculty Members:**

This is the first of the 1995-96 series of Assessment Bulletins. If you would like to continue receiving these publications, please call 545-2564 or e-mail Martha Stassen ([mstassen@acad.umass.edu](mailto:mstassen@acad.umass.edu)).