

Teacher evaluations help in promotion process

By Lawson Reilly

The end of the semester is near. A teacher evaluation form, full of potential, lies before you on the desk. It's a chance for revenge and a chance to flatter, a chance to offer praise and a chance to vent frustrations.

But you can leave as soon as you finish the form, and you're seriously wondering whether the impact of your evaluation is going to be worth the 10 minutes it will take to fill it out. What happens to them anyway? After slipping the evaluations into those Manila envelopes you never hear of them again.

True, no one student's evaluation is going to make or break a teacher's career. But those Manila envelopes aren't just thrown into the incinerator once they get back to the department offices.

Although the evaluation procedure varies between departments at Texas A&M, evaluations ultimately serve as an important feedback source for instructors. They indicate where a professor's teaching technique needs work and offer suggestions as to how teaching and courses could be improved.

Departments also use the

evaluations to monitor an instructor's performance. Department heads and committees consider them when making promotions and tenure decisions. And the evaluations are especially critical for graduate students and professors low in the academic hierarchy, who depend on good ratings for their continued employment.

The questionnaires themselves differ among colleges and departments, but they usually consist of a numerical, or quantitative, evaluation and a written, or qualitative, evaluation. The quantitative portion of the

questionnaire can be computer processed to find totals for individual instructors, for a particular course and for the department as a whole.

Dr. Harold Underwood, an assistant professor of biology, says the biology department developed its own questionnaire because science courses often have labs. Lab evaluations require different questions than an evaluation intended for lecture courses.

Dr. William Bassichis, a physics professor, designed the physics department's teacher evaluation questionnaire, with the help of people from the sociology and the education departments. He says creating a document intended to gather course and teacher evaluations in numerical form is difficult.

"It turns out that this is a rather tricky business," Bassichis says.

The physics department designates certain days toward the end of each semester for evaluations, he says. Physics instructors do not pass out the evaluations to their own classes, Bassichis says. Instead, another professor or teaching assistant passes out and collects the evaluations while the class instructor is not present. Bassichis says the completed evaluations are kept in a safe and are not released to instructors until after grades have been turned in.

The evaluations first pass through the department head, he says, before being returned to the instructors.

Bassichis says he uses the evaluations' to find out how students feel about his teaching. Written comments are more useful than numbers in this aspect, so he encourages his students to write suggestions and comments on the back of the forms.

Underwood agrees with Bassichis that written comments are more informative than numbers.

"When somebody just fills in a bubble or a number, that doesn't do you as much good," he says.

Bassichis says committees and instructors also pay a good deal of attention to students' comments when reviewing textbooks and course outlines.

The multiple choice type questions don't zero in on specific problems well, Bassichis says, but they can indicate general levels of teaching performance. For example, if an instructor receives consistently low evaluation scores, he's probably a poor teacher.

Dr. Larry Ringer, head of the statistics department, says evaluations are largely for the instructor's benefit. But the department also reviews evaluations of graduate students and non-tenure professors, he says.

Graduate students' evaluations are reviewed by the department and used when writing their letters of recommendation. Ringer says non-tenure professors' evaluations are reviewed when they are being considered for promotions.

Ringer says the department doesn't request evaluations from professors with tenure. However, tenure professors distribute the evaluations for their own use, he says.

Dr. Paul Wellman, associate professor of psychology at A&M, says student evaluations are definitely a factor when considering psychology faculty for promotion or tenure. Students' comments on textbooks and course material are also taken into consideration by professors, he says.

Dr. J.W. Howze, head of the electrical engineering department, says he reviews each instructor's evaluation. He looks for number trends in the quantitative data which might reveal problem areas in an instructor's technique. But the written comments are more helpful, he says.

"I feel if a student feels strong enough about something to write it down it must be worth looking at," Howze says.

Howze also listens to comments from students and other professors to monitor an instructor's performance.

Student evaluations play an important part in the promotion process, especially when a professor is being considered for tenure by the tenure promotion committee, Howze says.

Dr. Malcolm Richards, associate dean of the College of Business, says student responses to the college's questionnaire are used as part of the promotion review process. Sometimes department heads and instructors discuss the responses, especially answers to the open-ended question portion of the evaluation, in goal review sessions.

"One of the important things we try to evaluate is teacher effectiveness," Richards says.

Dr. M.P. Rosynek, associate head of the chemistry department, says his department uses both student and peer evaluations to monitor the performance of non-tenure instructors and to make promotion decisions. Professors also evaluate one another by sitting in on each other's lectures, he says.

Most A&M departments keep teacher evaluations confidential, limiting their exposure to department heads, review committees and the instructors. In some departments the instructor is the only person who sees his written comments.

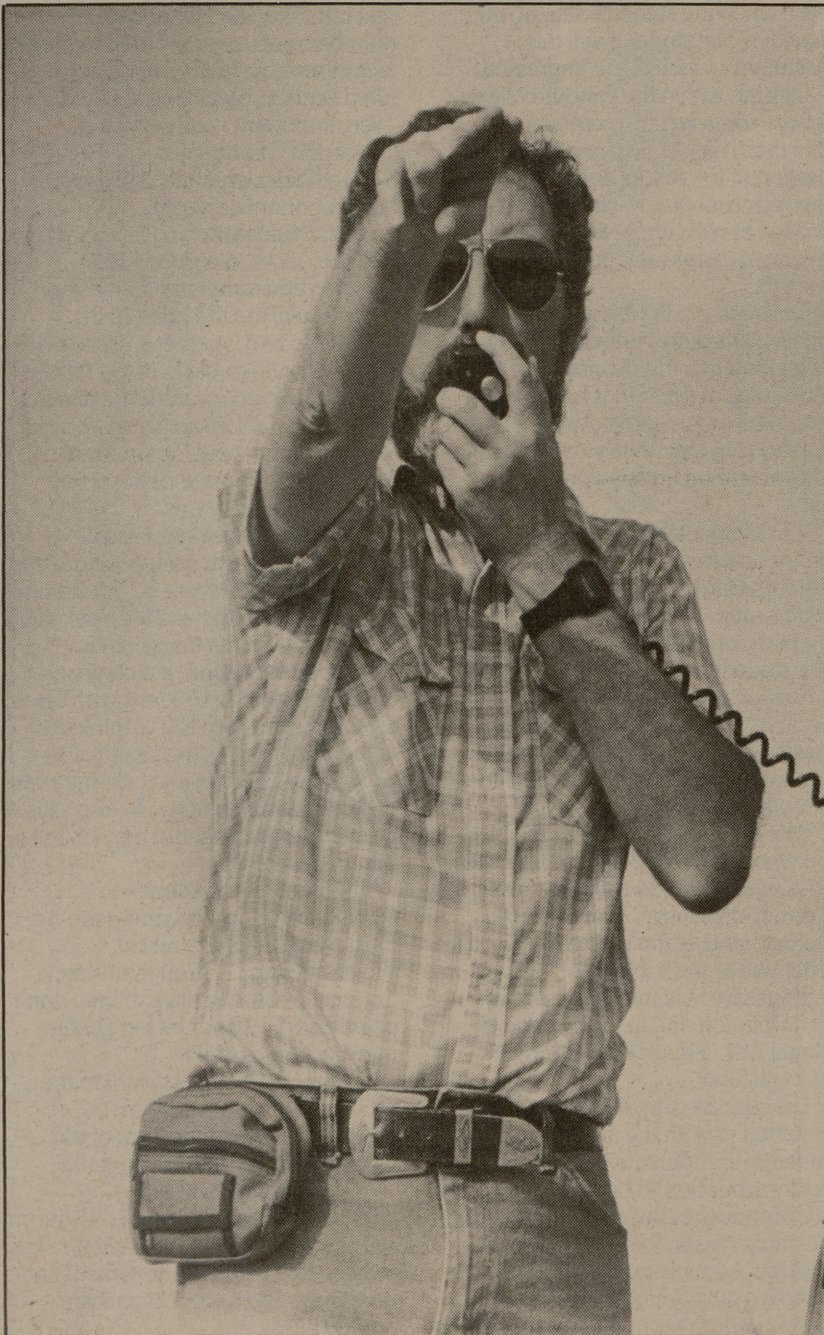


Photo by Fred Joe

Dr. Peter Hugill points out geographical features of Galveston to his geography students on a recent field trip to the Island.