

The Evaluation Problem

Student apathy and untimely results hamper the effectiveness of evaluations

For years now, students have been troubled with understanding the exact purpose of end-of-course evaluations. This lack of understanding is shown in the number of people that leave class as the instructor walks out to have them administered. Again this year, students stared at the Texas A&M course evaluations that are handed out in every one of their classes, and again these students have yet to see the point of them.



KELLN ZIMMER

A favorite question asked on evaluations has always been, "Is this course required?"

Even if it is a supporting course or an elective, chances are it is somehow required for a student's degree. If the question is asking whether the course is required for a student's major, it should be clarified.

Unclear wording aside, the "Instructor and Course Appraisal" could use some reworking. The evaluation process is somewhat foreign to students completing the evaluations. The lack of noticeable results from feedback increases the apathy which plagues student evaluations. Students are unaware of what is accomplished by completing evaluations.

As it stands now, evaluations are administered at the end of the term and are reviewed and presented back to the department at the beginning of the next term. According to Measurement and Research, the individual departments are given the results and determine how they will use the information.

There is no room for progress in such a system. In case of poor evaluations, professors cannot be held accountable for their methods because by the time the information reaches them their jobs are secure for another semester and they, in some cases, may go on using poor teaching

methods unchecked. To combat this and in an effort to provide more immediate feedback, the A&M Student Senate has called for midterm evaluations.

But this is a resource that already exists at A&M. According to Nancy Simpson, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), there are resources currently available for teachers to conduct midterm evaluations.

"The Early Feedback Program in conjunction with Measurement and Research Services allows for professors to evaluate their classes early in the semester in hopes of providing feedback during the term," Simpson said. CTE administers an evaluation mid-semester, much like the current evaluations from Measurement and Research, and there are spaces underneath the scale for student comments. CTE officials also perform classroom evaluations to make recommendations to teachers in effort to improve their teaching, according to Simpson.

The professor must request this service, though. "The program is in its third semester of operation, and right now, we have as much business as our office can handle with our current staff," Simpson said. CTE recommends teachers perform their own informal evaluations at midterm.

Mark Troy, associate director of the Office of Measurement and Research, said midterm evaluations on the same scale as the current final ones would not be feasible for the office to conduct at this time. "We

receive over 150,000 forms for more than 5,000 courses." The turnaround time for the final evaluations is somewhere between two and three weeks for most of the classes.

"Due to the volume, it is very unlikely that all of the course evaluations will

be returned before the start of the new semester. In fact, it is very likely that many will still be here at the start of the spring semester," Troy said. Evaluations cannot be processed during exam week, due to final exams that must be handled by Measurement and Research Services.

The most compelling argument against the current form of evaluations is how the students regard them. Many students choose to leave class rather than complete the evaluation. Others simply bubble in "strongly agree" on all of the questions, get a free pencil and get out of class fifteen minutes early.

For evaluations to be effective, student should realize that departments and the University take the evaluations quite seriously, Troy said. "The evaluations are very important in promotion and tenure applications and University mandate says you must show evidence of teaching ability. These evaluations are taken more seriously than students realize and perhaps somewhat less than faculty fear," he said. Dr. Larry Gresham, associate professor of Marketing, and past director of CTE, sees the evaluation system as a valuable tool for faculty choosing to take advantage of the information. They have the opportunity to take the evaluations and use them to improve their courses the next time they teach and take

student comments and concerns into consideration, he said.

Dr. Gresham also is a proponent for midterm evaluations and the services provided by CTE.

"Midterm evaluations are especially useful if a class is being taught for the first time or if it is professor or graduate student's first time to teach. In those cases you really do need evaluation before the course is over in order to improve and address teaching issues," he said.

Unfortunately though, according to Gresham, "Professors that need the services the least are the ones taking advantage of them."

If a University-wide midterm evaluation is not a feasible project to undertake, there should be some measure to allow more teachers to be evaluated mid semester with the help of CTE.

Confusing forms, slow turnaround and outdated questions mar the current process as does the stated purpose of determine pay raises, promotion, tenure reviews, and building teaching portfolios.

If a system was created to allow for rotation of courses and instructors were required to perform midterm evaluations, perhaps the course and the teaching would be the focus of the evaluations and positive feedback would be gained, thus improving the quality of courses offered at A&M.

Students will feel they have a role in the development of their education rather than simply the career assessment of their instructors if measures are taken while they are enrolled in a course.

For now though, students will have to live with the evaluation process and keep their fingers crossed that by bubbling in the "Expected Grade in Course" question with an "A," they will see results.

Kelln Zimmer is a senior English major.



LEIGH RICHARDSON • THE BATTALION

Reverse discrimination?

(U-WIRE) BOSTON — Somewhere between the massive Thanksgiving dinner at my grandmother's house, the hours spent lying on the family room couch catching up on "The Osbournes" and Lifetime Television for Women, and the various trips back and forth to the fridge for my third, fourth and fifth serving of Mom's homemade apple pie, I devoted a very small amount of time to completing dozens of law school and graduate school applications.

The applications, which do not differ much from the dozens of college applications I completed four years ago, include generic background information, transcripts, recommendations and some sort of personal statement or essay.

However, what was striking — and what I don't remember when applying to colleges — were the "optional minority or special circumstances questionnaires" attached to the university applications — questionnaires that allow a student to explain any factors about family background, economic circumstances or special responsibilities that may have affected his or her academic performance.

Looking over the "optional minority or special circumstances questionnaire," there were no boxes I could "x" or spaces I could fill in. I could not check the ethnicity box because I am neither American Indian nor Asian, Pacific Islander nor bilingual, African-American nor Hispanic. Nor could I indicate I was the victim of poverty, the inhabitant of a disadvantaged home or the child of divorcees — nor explain how I support a family or single-handedly raise a child. And though I looked for it, there was no box for "white child of middle-class, privately schooled, suburban parents" — and there was no blank space for me to elaborate on my "Leave it to Beaver" meets "Saved by the Bell" cookie-cutter background.

To me, the "optional minority or special circumstances questionnaire" was puzzling. Part of me couldn't help but wonder if the discrimination, which affirmative action tries so hard to prevent, had somehow been reversed and released itself on our generation of unsuspecting high school and college students, who naively think that hard work and good grades are the only prerequisites for getting accepted at a university. But then, I thought, while affirmative action is not a perfect system, it does seem to have the best of intentions: to provide equal opportunity regardless of background, race, etc.

"With the justices calling the shots, one side of the legal battlefield is the University of Michigan and its equal opportunity admission policy."

Therefore, to me, the concept of affirmative action seems a completely no-win situation — a factor that may explain why the United States Supreme Court has continuously dodged the issue and refused to hear relevant cases. And not since 1978, when it ambiguously deemed sustaining racial quotas unconstitutional for federally funded colleges and universities in their application selections, have the nine justices agreed to tackle the constitutionality of affirmative action in the selection of college applicants.

But on Monday, the justices stepped — or in the more geriatric cases — shuffled, alongside the issue of affirmative action, back into the limelight to referee what could be a colossal battle in the making. On Monday, the Supreme Court justices granted certiorari to two pending lawsuits against the University of Michigan — lawsuits filed on the premise that certain white applicants were denied admittance in favor of less-qualified minority students.

From where they stand, the justices are posed to make the first significant ruling on affirmative action in the last quarter-century — and perhaps make "optional minority or special circumstances questionnaires" a thing of the past.

With the justices calling the shots, one side of the legal battlefield is the University of Michigan and its equal-opportunity admission policy. It is claimed in the lawsuit that the University of Michigan ran two separate admissions systems in order to generate a pre-determined racial profile of an incoming class.

One admission system evaluated non-minority students on a 150-point scale, while a second system automatically gave blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans an initial 20-point advantage over the non-minority students. And while this system is now outdated and archaic, according to CNN, University of Michigan admissions officers, like the majority of private and public universities, freely admit to taking

"race into account as a factor among many in order to pursue the educational benefit of diversity."

Facing the university are two students who claim themselves victims of racial discrimination. They allege their test scores and grades far surpass those of accepted minority students. And while they may indeed have suffered at the hands of "reverse discrimination," the students were hand-selected from thousands of other potential white students as "perfect" students by money-hungry lawyers and anti-affirmative action interest groups as the impetus of a monumental lawsuit against the university.

And tucked somewhere off to the side are two additional, and much more important, opponents: the United States Constitution and the university's generic equal-opportunity credo.

The former — which abolished slavery, guarantees the freedoms of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and most importantly, demands that no individual or group is given advantages based on race or religion — stands ready to clash with the latter — a policy held by many public and private schools and insisting education is better served by diversity.

Affirmative action began as an attempt to rectify gross racial injustices of the past — and in order to offer equal opportunities to everyone on the racial spectrum of the future. It made it possible for the children and grandchildren of poor minorities, who spent their lives and livelihoods as second-class American citizens riding in the backs of buses and sitting in the balconies of movie theaters, to receive the same opportunities in employment and education despite the economic and educational advantages within non-minority communities.

This June, the Supreme Court will make one of the most controversial decisions on affirmative action since 1978. "Optional minority or special circumstances" questionnaires may become a thing of the past — or they may be protected by the Constitution as a fixed element of the future. And in choosing between the two, the Supreme Court will inevitably make dramatic changes in the process of applying to institutions of higher education.

For now, however, I'm just thankful my applications are already in the mail.

Denise Spellman is a columnist at Boston University.

MAIL CALL

Aggie spirit lacking on today's campus

My first semester as a fish has been somewhat discouraging. Everyday I walk around campus and I can't believe what I see. Aggies are supposed to be students of respect and honor, and at least once a week I see fellow Aggies walking on the grass at the Memorial Student Center.

Rarely will I get a reply when I throw out a friendly "Howdy!" — not even an acknowledgement. It seems like no one knows about the significance of the Century Tree anymore, or even knows what it is.

I see people carelessly walking under it every day. I don't understand what has happened to the 12th Man.

Fortunately I was blessed with the opportunity to be at the last Bonfire in 1998, and I saw the true Aggie Spirit.

Hundreds of students crossing University at Northgate sounded off with a thunderous "Whoop!" as my brother blew Hullabaloo on his horn.

Neither a Farmers Fight Festival nor anything else could ever take the place of Bonfire. The thought

of that experience sends chills running down my spine.

One of the main reasons I chose this great university was for the Aggie traditions that I thought would still be here.

Now there are only a handful of true Ags. Just this past weekend I was talking to my brother, Clint Harris '00, about his experiences while at A&M, and he told me that everyone said howdy, and every time a professor would mention an upcoming exam the whole class would hiss, and whoop when they mentioned holidays or breaks.

He, too, was disappointed when I told him how it is now. He said exactly what I was thinking: It's like going to school with a bunch of t-sips!

Now I ask you, Ags, why has it changed? It is up to us to rekindle and keep that Fightin' Texas Aggie Spirit.

So when you leave class today, say "Howdy" to the people you pass, hiss at the students wearing burnt orange, and wildcat when something motivates you. Be Aggies!

Cody Harris
Class of 2006

