

CLAS Personnel Committee View On Student Evaluations

Student evaluations are present in all personnel dossiers at GVSU. All instructors, even the very best, get some complaints on these evaluations, and faculty naturally worry about how they will be interpreted during personnel reviews.

The College Personnel Committee reads student evaluations carefully, looking for consistent patterns of student comments. When these consistent patterns appear, the committee members try to use the evaluations and the other information available in the dossier to place the evaluations in an appropriate pedagogical context. The committee pays attention to positive evaluations as well as negative ones; if students consistently comment that the instructor has "contagious enthusiasm," the CPC reviewers will notice.

One of the purposes of the student evaluation system is to give faculty opportunities to reflect on their teaching and improve it. When a consistent pattern of complaints appears, the CPC looks to see whether the applicant has recognized the pattern, offered an interpretation, and described a response if one seems appropriate. For example, an applicant might write "In my first two semesters teaching this course, many students complained that I was too harsh grading their papers and that they couldn't tell what I wanted, despite extensive classroom discussions of the source material and its interpretation. In response, I have collected two examples each of A and C papers on a single topic, distributed them as a reading assignment, and spent half a class period in a discussion of what characteristics made the first pair better than the second. Since I introduced that exercise, student complaints of unclear standards have diminished to about one per semester."

Student complaints of "the course is too hard," "the exams are too difficult," "there's too much reading," "the standards are too high," etc., appear frequently. In these cases the CPC looks for evidence in the file that the instructor is making a conscious effort to make sure the level of the course is appropriate, explaining to the students what the expectations are, and offering guidance about effective ways to meet those expectations.

Consistent student complaints that the instructor is unprepared for class, disorganized, or disrespectful to students elicit close attention. Sometimes these comments indicate a mismatch between the instructor's style and the behavior expected by the students; for instance, an instructor who heavily uses inquiry- or discovery-style instruction may appear unprepared to students who are accustomed to sitting and listening to lectures. Other times they may indicate genuine problems. Again, the CPC looks for interpretation and responses by the candidate in the integrative statement and supporting documents.

It is not necessary for faculty to lower their standards or pander to students out of fear of negative student evaluations. It is necessary for faculty to show that they take the evaluations seriously, reflect on what they have to say about the effectiveness of the instruction, and respond when changes are appropriate. The CPC looks for evidence of that reflection and pedagogical evolution, not for an absence of complaints.

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CPC Chair, 2010-2011