TEACHING EVALUATION GONE DIGITAL

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Faculty teaching in higher education is evaluated on a regular basis. By convention, evaluations are conducted in a number of ways. Institutions require student evaluations to be conducted close to the end of a term. Students are asked to respond to a prepared evaluation form, usually asking them to rate instructors on a number of criteria. Depending on the institution, students can make additional comments in the form that is considered by the institution. Alternatively, students can write letters of praise or complaint about a faculty member that should be addressed to the chair of the department, where students are required to identify themselves, e.g. California State Universities, by agreement with the faculty union, will not consider anonymous comments in the institutional evaluation of instructors. Additionally, some institutions require that peers (colleagues of higher rank) evaluate instructors by examining their syllabi and course content (e.g. handouts, tests) and sitting in on a class session to observe teaching.

Experienced students, on their own, evaluate faculty prior to choosing classes to register for. Traditionally, they would consult their peers and ask for recommendations. With the advent of the internet, the current generation of millennial students has increasingly gone to the internet for information. There are websites rating professors aimed at particular campuses as well as websites with a national target.

The purpose of this special session is to generate a conversation about the various issues that are pertinent to having student comments about faculty published online. Presenters will divide the issues and encourage the audience to share in their experiences.

The session will start with a comparison of institutional evaluations and student evaluations. This will focus on traditional student evaluations and touch on peer evaluations for retention, tenure and promotion. Criteria used in these evaluations will be discussed. Issues that impact formal student evaluations like student expectations and perceptions of faculty, size of the class, gender of faculty, etc., some of which have been studied in the literature.

Formal institutional evaluations will be compared to evaluations that students make of faculty. How do students shop for classes? Students in the past would use traditional word of mouth to find out this type of information but with the emergence of technology, this activity can be performed online. These reviews are volunteered by students, with motivations varying widely from helping

fellow students to make wise decisions in choosing classes and schools, to helping contribute to the reputation (positive or negative) of faculty or the university, to contribute personal experience as a return to the information of online communities, etc. Hence, students are likely to have access to a wider array of opinions to make judgments as to whether a professor's teaching approach would be suitable for a student's particular needs. The one difference between the traditional way of finding this information and the way it is currently done is that students' opinions of their professors are anonymous in this format.

A short discussion on cross-cultural differences between students in the US and overseas will be included. Specifically, Turkey will be discussed as an example of students' use of internet sites. Reviews about professors can be found at the U.S. internet sites however there are very few reviews written by Turkish students at internet sites that are the Turkish equivalent of ratemyprofessors.com . Even though the people in Turkey utilize the reviews while making purchase decisions, they generally prefer not to write reviews. It will be interesting to examine the factors behind this behavioral difference.

Some detail will be included about the various online websites. Those that are institution-specific and those that are targeting a national audience (e.g. ratemyprofessor.com) will be compared with regards to required student information for a profile and type of comments posted. Information to be used for comparison may include: venues of reviews, anonymity of reviews, voluntary nature of reviews, purpose of reviews, structure of reviews, variance of the results, and accessibility of the reviews, etc.

Results of a survey will be presented. This survey will consider the likelihood that students will consult these websites as well as their likelihood to post. It will also look into how much influence these websites have on student choices of classes, or are there more pressing issues like class availability, work schedules, etc. Are other social media sites being used to conduct information exchanges between students about faculty? These will be cross-tabulated to discover whether there are differences according to students' ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics.

Then, faculty reaction to these websites will be discussed, as well as other related issues. Some faculty finds the online evaluations amusing while others think they are "counterproductive and wholly immature" (Jarvis 2009). Some are so annoyed that they start to take revenge by rating their students on a blog called rateyourstudents.blogspot.com. A comparison between the ratings on RateMyProfessors.com and the institutionally administered student evaluations for the same professors in regards to easiness, clarity, and helpfulness shows that these online ratings are valid

(Sonntag, Bassett, and Snyder 2005). Whether we like it or not, that's how students get their information nowadays.

Two major related issues to be brought up are privacy and legal issues. Are there any measures faculty can take to counteract anonymous comments online? What have students posted online about faculty beyond comments on these websites. Are there any legal ramifications to posting material online about faculty without their permission?