

THE ROLE OF PUBLISHED COURSE EVALUATIONS IN STUDENTS' CLASS SELECTION DECISIONS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY USING CHOICE-BASED CONJOINT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Research on the validity and utility of student evaluations of teaching (SET) has been ongoing since they were first administered in 1926 at the University of Washington (d'Apollonia and Abrami 1997). The question of whether SET are a valid measure of measure teaching effectiveness and issues relating to their use in faculty evaluation and promotion decisions have generated well over two thousand separate pieces of academic research and commentary (Greenwald 1997; Wilson 1998).

However, few studies have addressed the issue of how students might use SET to select courses. A growing number of universities publish SET on-line, making them available to the campus community and, in some cases, to the general public (Haskell 1997). Many states have open-records laws that permit the release of SET data because of the public (i.e., student) interest in those records. Recent attempts to deny student access to SET by faculty and administrators at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Idaho have failed in the courtroom, although some recent articles question the legality of releasing SET to the public on the grounds that the publication of student "anecdotal data" may libel or defame a faculty member (see Haskell 1997 for a review).

The conjoint experiment discussed in this paper explores how students might use SET and other pertinent information about courses and instructors to make course selection decisions, if such data were available. A sample of 127 undergraduate business majors at a regional Northwestern university (who did not have access to SET data) were exposed to a series of hypothetical choice tasks where they were asked to choose between two courses that varied with respect to the instructor's SET ratings (poor, average, excellent), the instructor's grading leniency (easy, moderate or hard grader), course worth or the usefulness of the knowledge gained in the course for one's major (very little knowledge, some, a great deal), and the assigned workload (light, moderate, heavy).

Multinomial logit analysis of the choice data revealed that course evaluations (SET) have a significant

influence on course choice, but that course worth and grading leniency are the most important determinants of choice. The most preferred course configuration (the one with the greatest total utility) is one where the instructor provides a great deal of useful knowledge, is a lenient grader, receives excellent student course evaluations and assigns a moderate amount of work. Share of preference simulations indicated that students are twice as likely to choose a course with an instructor that receives excellent, as opposed to average, course evaluations, all else being equal. However, students are willing to put up with poor course evaluations or a heavy workload if they believe that they will gain a great deal of useful knowledge.

Findings from the exploratory research presented here indicate that SET information, if available, would play a significant role in students' course selection decisions. Given that this information is not currently available, students in this study may not realize how important SET data could be in assisting with course selection decisions. However, providing student access to SET data may cause faculty to focus on improving their evaluations without necessarily improving instructional quality. The recent administrative emphasis on treating the student as a "customer" whose needs and desires must be satisfied (Wilson 1998) may exacerbate this problem. The paper concludes with a discussion of study limitations and future research directions.

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