IMPROVING INSTRUCTOR EVALUATION PROGRAMS: INTEGRATING IMPORTANCE AND EXPECTATIONS DIMENSIONS

Michael W. Pass, Cal State San Marcos, San Marcos, CA 92096 (760) 750-4240 mwpass@csusm.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a conceptual model featuring two dimensions that may improve the way students' evaluations of instructors are used at institutions. The dimensions are described with hypotheses advanced for empirical testing. Making the assumption that empirical support will be found, implementation issues are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

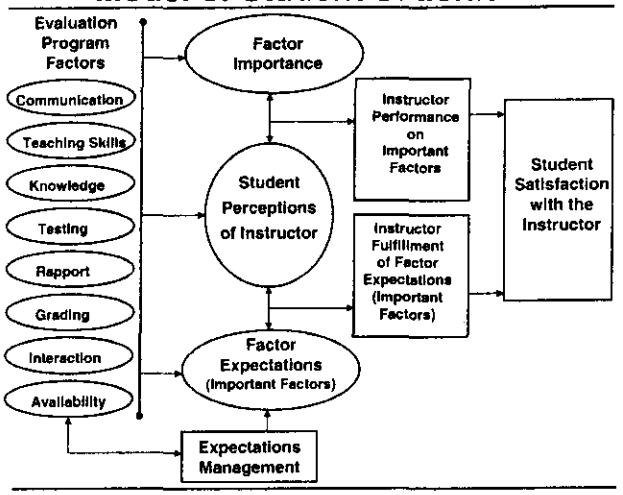
A survey of AACSB members found that deans and department heads rated classroom teaching as the most important component in evaluating annual faculty performance (Anderson and Shao 2002). When asked how student evaluation scores (i.e. satisfaction ratings) were used for evaluation purposes, respondents indicated that mean scores for an instructor were evaluated primarily by making comparisons to department, discipline, college and university aggregate mean scores. This approach suggests that improvements can be made in the way student ratings are used for evaluation purposes.

Evaluation programs that simply report student satisfaction mean scores for instructor characteristics (e.g., teaching skills) with a general satisfaction score have two limitations. The scores may be used to complete comparisons of the instructor's performance in the classroom without actually indicating key areas where instructors should apply effort to improve students' overall satisfaction. Even if this guidance is provided, instructors may not understand the degree to which they need to change in order to increase student satisfaction. To address these limitations, instructor evaluation programs should provide an understanding of: 1) the factors students believe to be important when they evaluate instructors, and 2) the students' expectations for instructor performance on these factors.

MODEL OF STUDENT SATISFACTION

The Model of Student Satisfaction (Figure 1) assumes that a common set of factors (e.g., communication, teaching skills) associated with good teaching are determined by faculty, students and administrators for an evaluation program. Several studies have described characteristics of effective instructors which can be reviewed for factors that are appropriate for a particular institution. Literature reviews related to characteristics associated with effective teaching (Whitlark, Geurts and Rhoads 2002; Chonko, Tanner and Davis 2002) are good sources for this information. To illustrate typical factors, a comparison of findings from two studies is described below that suggests the use of eight common factors. These are presented in Figure 1 as Evaluation Program Factors.

FIGURE 1
Model of Student Satisfaction



The Model of Student Satisfaction (Figure 1) includes Factor Importance and Factor Expectations as dimensions that influence Student Satisfaction with Instructors. They are viewed as being separate, yet related, dimensions. Each represents distinctive perceptions held by students that can be considered jointly when evaluating instructor performance and diagnosing where to make improvements. The Factor Importance dimension suggests the relative emphasis to be placed on each factor as indicated by importance ratings. In contrast, the Factor Expectations dimension indicates the degree to which specific aspects of the factors should be addressed by an instructor.

FACTOR IMPORTANCE

Evaluation programs assessing factors that are both relevant to the learning environment and important to students offer two benefits. First, the information gathered through these evaluation programs can be used to focus the attention of instructors on areas where the university, or college, has previously set explicit or implicit standards. Secondly, instructors can diagnose how well they perform on key factors that are relatively more important to students. The impetus for considering the relative importance of these factors from the students' perspective is the belief that satisfaction ratings are influenced by the extent to which the instructor performs well in areas that are truly important to the students. Therefore, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H1: Student satisfaction with the instructor is positively related to the extent with which the instructor performs well on factors that are relatively more important to students.

What factors are important to students and which factors are relatively more important? Grunenwald and Ackerman (1986) used a modified Delphi technique to obtain agreement among students regarding factors associated with good teaching. Eight factors were identified: availability, communication skills, grading, interaction, knowledge of subject, rapport with students, teaching skills, and testing. In addition to developing clear definitions of these factors, their relative importance was obtained using mean scores from a 100 point constant-sum scale. More recently, Chonko, Tanner and Davis (2002) asked students to identify the most important things they expected of their professors. A total of 19 attributes were mentioned including several more items in the "other" category.

Table 1 presents the eight factors recognized by Grunenwald and Ackerman (1986) with mean scores. Attributes identified by Chonko, Tanner and Davis (2002) and the percentage of student responses for each are also presented. For comparison purposes, the attributes have been categorized based on factor definitions provided by Grunenwald and Ackerman (1986). Findings from both studies support use of the eight factors (Grunenwald and Ackerman 1986) when examining instructor performance.

The ranking in Table 1 suggests factors that should receive greater attention from instructors. It is is based on both mean scores indicating relative importance (Grunenwald and Ackerman 1986) and a total percentage of the student responses reported by Chonko, Tanner and Davis (2002) for each attribute. Multiple attributes were expressed by students so the attribute percentages are not meant to add-up to 100%. Although differences exist between the rankings of factors based on mean scores and percentage responses, four factors ranked highly in both studies: Communication Skills, Teaching Skills, Knowledge of the Subject and Rapport with Students.

TABLE 1
Evaluation Program Factors: Ranking of Importance

Factor	Attribute/Percentage of Students Expressing	Rank
Communication Skills	Interesting (11.9) Communicates Well (10.7) Easy to Talk to (10.3) Interested in Subject (4.0) Enthusiastic (2.7) Loves to Teach (1.9) Sense of Humor (1.5)	1 (17.03) 43%
Rapport with Students	Wants Students to Learn (1.4) Good Personality (7.9) Kind (6.0) Understanding (4.7)	2 (11.03) 20%
Teaching Skills	Organized (1.10) Helps Students (11.6)	3 (15.79) 12.7%
Knowledge of Subject	Knowledgeable (3.4) Experienced (1.1)	4 (15.64) 4.5%
Grading	Fair (2.5)	5 (10.45) 2.5%
Interaction	Easy-going Style (1.2) Open-minded (1.1)	6 (9.93) 2.3%
Testing	No Attributes Categorized	7 (11.84)
Availability	No Attributes Categorized	8 (7.49)

FACTOR EXPECTATIONS

While it is beneficial to know which factors students believe to be relatively more important, it is also valuable to understand their expectations for the factors. Attributes such as those included in Table 1 can be developed into scales items representing each factor. These can be used to determine what students expect from a typical instructor.

Predictive, normative, and comparative expectations have been identified in the marketing literature (Prakash 1984). Comparative expectations regarding the attributes of factors are used as "benchmarks" when evaluating instructors. For example, students will have beliefs about the likelihood of a typical instructor exhibiting a "sense of humor" in the classroom. If this attribute is an indicator of the factor communication and it is expected by many students, communication factor ratings of an instructor that regularly uses humor will be relatively higher than those reported for an instructor that does not exhibit a "sense of humor".

There are two reasons why it is useful to understand the students' comparative expectations for a typical instructor. First, instructors benefit from gaining knowledge about the performance level they must achieve to have positive interactions with students. Assuming students' expectations are realistic, they can take actions to improve the quality of their teaching and influence student satisfaction ratings. The second reason is related to the possibility that students' comparative expectations may be inaccurate or even unrealistic. Instructors may be able to shape them to be more accurate.

Figure 1 represents Instructor Fulfillment of Factor Expectations (of important factors) as influencing Student Satisfaction with the Instructor. This conceptualization is similar to that expressed in literature related to consumer satisfaction. Consumer satisfaction has been depicted as resulting from the difference between the consumer's expectations and the degree to which these expectations are met (Oliver 1980; Zeithaml, Berry and. Parasuraman 1993; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1994). In this paper, the difference between expectations held by students for important factors and their evaluation of the instructor's performance on these factors is considered. If a difference exists between what students expect and the instructor's performance, then the students' level of satisfaction is lowered. Conversely, students will be more satisfied with the instructor's performance as their expectations for important factors are fulfilled. The following hypothesis states this proposed relationship more formally:

H2: Student satisfaction with the instructor is positively related to the extent with which the students' expectations for important factors are fulfilled by the instructor.

EXPECTATIONS MANAGEMENT

The Model of Student Satisfaction (Figure 1) includes Expectations Management to suggest that student expectations for important factors are shaped by instructors and their institutions. It is highly likely that factors which students believe to be important and their expectations for the attributes of these factors will be different from those expressed by faculty and administrators. Differences in views held by students and faculty regarding the importance of evaluation items have been reported by Desai, Damewood and Jones (2001). Considering the perspective of students, their expectations are shaped by different things, including previous educational experiences, "word-of-mouth" from other students and student orientation sessions. Expectations for attributes of important factors (e.g., communication, teaching skills, grading) continue to develop as they interact with instructors. Managing expectations by explicitly communicating the instructor's role in the learning process and what is expected of students may improve student evaluations of the instructor. Students' expectations would be more accurate and the instructor's involvement in clarifying and meeting student expectations may improve the likelihood that expectations are fulfilled.

IMPLEMENTATION: INTEGRATING DIMENSIONS

Integrating Factor Importance and Factor Expectations into existing instructor evaluation programs should be accomplished after empirically testing the hypotheses related to the Model of Student Satisfaction (Figure 1). Assuming the hypothesized relationships are supported, student responses indicating Factor Importance and Factor Expectations (i.e. expectations for factor attributes) may be collected periodically (e.g. once each year) to establish benchmarks. As student ratings of instructors on factors and attributes are obtained, comparisons can be made to the importance and expectations data. These can be completed using summary scores of factors to provide general direction on where to make improvements. Attribute scores can then be considered for an indication of specific actions to improve performance on a factor of interest. Providing this information with the widely used mean score comparisons of instructors to department, discipline, college and university scores improves the diagnostic value of ratings provided by students.

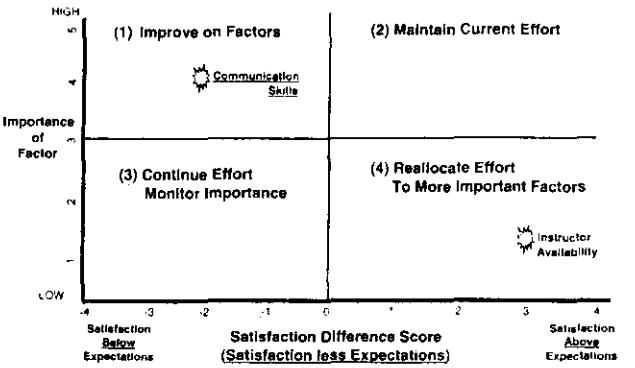
Importance rankings can be reported to suggest the relative emphasis to be placed on each factor. Student satisfaction indexes may be included with these rankings to reveal the extent to which students' satisfaction with each factor exceeded or fell below expectations. The indexes are calculated as a ratio of satisfaction to expectations (e.g., communication satisfaction divided by communication expectations).

One commonly used graphical tool is a four-cell matrix based on axes indicating high-low levels of importance, or expectations, and student satisfaction. Typically, the cells suggest actions to be taken: 1) Improve on Factors, 2) Maintain Current Effort, 3) Continue Effort/Monitor Importance, and 4) Reallocate Effort To More Important Factors. One matrix can be produced to represent factor importance and student satisfaction ratings. This matrix indicates, generally, where to direct effort when making improvements. A separate matrix is then used to show factor expectations and student satisfaction ratings. This second matrix reveals the extent to which student expectations are being fulfilled. Expectations for attributes related to each factor can also be included to indicate specific actions that may be taken by an instructor.

A more coherent approach using the four-cell matrix involves representing student satisfaction with difference scores calculated from factor expectation scores and student satisfaction ratings. The difference scores represent the extent to which student expectations are fulfilled. The four-cell matrix displays them in relation to importance rankings of the factors. Reporting the data in this way with one matrix may ease interpretation and ensure that the benefit of considering student expectations is not overlooked. Figure 2 provides an example of the second approach using a four-cell matrix with scores reported for the Communication Skills and Instructor Availability factors. Using satisfaction-importance (expectations) matrices, aggregated data can be plotted for a college, or department, to indicate factors needing attention. Alternatively, data can be plotted for individual instructors.

As depicted in Figure 2, communication skills of the instructor are not meeting expectations held by students for this factor. This is indicated by the satisfaction-expectations difference score (-2) derived from the instructor's satisfaction ratings on this factor at 2.5 and expectations reported by students at 4.5. Therefore, the instructor's communication skills would be a primary area for improvement because, in this example, expectations are not being met on a factor that is very important to students. As suggested previously, the instructor's next step would be to examine the attribute expectations scores in relation to the students' satisfaction scores. This review would indicate specific actions that could be taken to improve performance on the communication skills factor.

FIGURE 2
Satisfaction – Importance Matrix



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since an emphasis on student satisfaction ratings will more than likely continue, it is beneficial to focus on factors that influence student satisfaction ratings and "measure what matters" to students. Empirical testing of the Model of Student Satisfaction (Figure 1) may support integration of this student-centric approach into evaluation programs that currently do not consider students' perceptions of Factor Importance and Factor Expectations. Information related to these dimensions can be conveyed in a manner that may help instructors focus their effort on important factors and fulfill student expectations for attributes related to the factors.

The opinions of some students regarding the relative importance of factors and their level of expectations for factor attributes may be different from those held by instructors and their institutions. They may even be unrealistic. Therefore, it is important to manage student expectations so they have an accurate understanding of the learning environment. Exploring ways to improve instructor evaluation programs and manage student expectations appears to be rich areas for further research. Hopefully, this paper will stimulate some discussion and ideas that will advance research activity in these areas.

REFERENCES

References are available from the author.