Interpreting and Working with

Your SPOTs Results: A Guide for Faculty

In collaboration with the Rewarding and Evaluating Teaching Committee, the Center for the Advancement of Teaching created this guide to support FIU faculty in interpreting SPOTs: Student Perceptions of Teaching survey reports. Within this guide, you’ll find detailed descriptions of each section of your SPOTs report. For those using student feedback to refine their teaching, we have also included brief explanations of each survey question—connecting each to research on course design or instruction and suggesting a few practical ways to respond.

At the end of this guide, you’ll find a brief overview of the SPOTs survey itself, including its history, and an update about the progress of the Evaluating Teaching project.

If you have questions about the Student Perceptions of Teaching survey, interpreting your results, or any aspect of this guide, please contact teach@fiu.edu. We particularly appreciate suggestions to improve the guide, as this is the second version, and we will be revising it regularly to keep up with changes to the survey instrument, proposed methods for evaluating effective teaching at FIU, and current research on these subjects.

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Working with SPOTs Results

First things first: Perhaps counterintuitively, we’d like to suggest that you not navigate directly to your SPOTs results. Your own perceptions of and reflections on your teaching are at least as important as students’ responses, so we encourage you to take a few moments to ask yourself: How’d it go? Did my students learn what I hoped they would? Which elements of my course design, pedagogy, and/or interactions with students were most effective in helping them learn and thrive at FIU? By the same token, what didn’t work—and why?

Here, student grades, performance on exams or major assignments, as well as any feedback they shared during the term would prove invaluable. With this information in hand, you’ll be in a far better position to review your SPOTs results, as you can then compare your self-assessment to your students’ perceptions.

Below, on p. 20, we acknowledge some of the limitations of course ratings systems and share how we plan to respond to them. That said, SPOTs results are, for many of us, the main source of information about students’ experiences in our courses. As Supiano (2017) recognizes, students spend the greatest amount of time engaging with our teaching, and their learning and development are our chief institutional objectives. At CAT, we also agree wholeheartedly with teaching scholar Maryellen Weimer (2010): There is “[enormous] potential for faculty to grow and develop as teachers based on feedback provided by students” (p. 51).

This year, we tried to help students understand their role in the process and the value of their input. Here is the language sent to them:

Why is it important to fill out SPOTs?

Taking the time to provide feedback is valuable for you, your professors, and future FIU students. First, it gives you a chance to reflect on your experiences in your courses, to consider what you learned, how you learned it, and what might have helped you learn even more.

Second, FIU faculty members need your input! It gives them an opportunity to reflect on what worked well and what they could improve in the future. Professors enjoy learning the details about what students got out of taking the course, and reading your specific suggestions. The classes in which you learned the most were probably enhanced over time using feedback from students like you. Future FIU students will thank you!

When you’ve taken a bit of time to reflect on the semester and are ready to work with your SPOTs results, we hope this guide will be a helpful tool as you continue the essential, challenging, and rewarding work of teaching.
What’s in Your SPOTs Report?

Here we provide detailed descriptions of each section of the report. Then, starting on p. 9, the guide offers brief explanations of each survey question, connecting each to relevant research and suggesting a few practical ways to respond.

Your SPOTs report consists of 5 parts: Course Information and Response Rate, Survey Summary, Individual Question Results, Student Comments, and Student Information.
Course Information and Response Rate

The course information and response rate section of the report displays course identifiers (i.e., term, course and class section number, instructor name and course title). This section also includes the total number of students enrolled in the course, the number of students who have completed their SPOTs, and the corresponding rate of completion expressed as a percentage.

You can use the “Filters” feature to search for your individual courses. By selecting the term, course, and class section from the drop-down menus, you can bring up the individual SPOTs report for each class. Selecting “Reset” will return the screen to the default SPOTs report or the most recent course for which there is a SPOTs report available.

In addition to the instructor’s name, term, class section, course number and title, the total number of students enrolled (“Student Population”) in the course and the number of students (“Students Responded”) who have completed their SPOTs are displayed. The “Response Rate” is the number of students who have completed the survey expressed as a percentage. The “Response Rate” will appear in red font until the survey completion rate reaches 50% after which the number will be displayed in green font.

For strategies for increasing your survey response rates, see Appendix A.

Survey Summary

The individual questions on the survey are grouped into three categories: Course Structure, Learning Support, and Student-Instructor Interactions. These categories are meant to shed light on the three teaching and learning constructs represented in the current survey, and they are supported by an item analysis of FIU ratings results from previous terms. The survey summary shows the average ratings in each of those three categories as well as an overall average of the ratings for all survey questions.
Course Structure: These questions address the way the course was designed, including the objectives, assignments, expectations for performance, and grading policies. Since this survey measures students’ perceptions, the questions can elicit responses to both these aspects of the course and how they were communicated to students.

Question stems:
❖ Description of course objectives and assignments
❖ Expression of expectations for performance in this class
❖ Description of grading policies in the course syllabus

Learning Support: The questions in this category seek to measure student perceptions of how well the instructor followed through on implementing the course design as described in the syllabus, and how well the instructor helped them learn, including by designing and facilitating engaging learning activities, providing helpful feedback, moving at an appropriate pace, and communicating clearly.

Question stems:
❖ Consistency in following the course syllabus
❖ Preparation for class
❖ Use and management of class time
❖ Knowledge of course content
❖ Communication of ideas and information
❖ Stimulation of interest in course
❖ Facilitation of learning
❖ Provide feedback about your performance

Student-Instructor Interactions: The questions in this category seek to measure student perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of the student-instructor relationship. The availability, communication, and value of instructor feedback as well as the respect, concern, and fairness shown to the student and their peers are fundamental elements of that relationship.

Question stems:
❖ Availability to assist students in or out of class
❖ Respect and concern for students
❖ Fairness of instructor

Overall assessment of instructor: Frankly, it is difficult to know what this question represents. Some research suggests that the response to the “overall” or “global” question is a good proxy for students’ responses to the instructor, offering a good “summary” score; however, newer studies point out that the overall question may be “most likely to activate bias, because they leave it to the student to decide which of the many components of teaching, and teachers, are the most important to them” (Sprague, 2016).
**Individual Question Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>% Responses per Question</th>
<th>Total Responses per Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% Excellent</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Structure</td>
<td>1 Description of course objectives and assignments</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Expression of expectations for performance in the class</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Description of grading policies in the course syllabus</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Support</td>
<td>4 Consistency in following the course syllabus</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Preparation for class</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Use and management of class time</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Knowledge of course content</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 Communication of ideas and information</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 Stimulation of interest in course</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 Facilitation of learning</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 Provide feedback about your performance</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Instructor Interaction</td>
<td>12 Availability to assist students in or out of class</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 Respect and concern for students</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 Fairness of instructor</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 Overall assessment of instructor</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This section reports the frequencies of students’ responses to each question. The first column lists the three categories into which the questions are grouped. The next two columns contain each question number and text.

The next five columns show the proportion of students selecting each response category for a particular question, and the “no response” column show the proportion of students who did not respond to each question. The next five columns show the number of students selecting each response category for a particular question, and the “no response” column show the number of students who did not respond to each question.

**Example:** For question #11:
- 56.3% or 9 students responded “excellent” to this question.
- 6.3% or 1 student responded “very good” to this question.
- 12.5% or 2 students responded “good” to this question.
- 12.5% or 2 students responded “poor” to this question.
- 6.3% or 1 student submitted “no response” to this question.

The last two columns show the total proportion and number of responses per question.
**Average Points**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Average Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Structure</td>
<td>1 Description of course objectives and assignments</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Expression of expectations for performance in this class</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Description of grading policies in the course syllabus</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Support</td>
<td>4 Consistency in following the course syllabus</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Preparation for class</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Use and management of class time</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Knowledge of course content</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 Communication of ideas and information</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 Stimulation of interest in course</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 Facilitation of learning</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 Provide feedback about your performance</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 Availability to assist students in or out of class</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 Respect and concern for students</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 Fairness of instructor</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 Overall assessment of instructor</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table reports the average points for each question. This average is calculated by assigning the values to the ratings as follows:

- **Excellent**: 5
- **Very Good**: 4
- **Good**: 3
- **Fair**: 2
- **Poor**: 1

After the values have been assigned by students, the system multiplies the assigned values by the number of responses, respectively, and calculates the average based on total student responses.

**Example:** For question #12:
- 8 students responded with an Excellent rating (5pts.)
- 4 students responded with a Very Good rating (4 pts.)
- 3 students responded with a Good rating (3 pts.)
- 1 student responded with a Poor rating (1 pt.)

16 students responded, totaling 66 pts. earned, equaling an average score of 4.13.

**Student Comments**

The SPOTs form requests “Comments” and includes a text box. The instructions to students offer the following guidance: “When responding to question 16, which requests written comments, please include details to support your impressions.”

On p. 17, the guide offers suggestions on how to interpret and respond to student comments.
In this section, we ask students to provide information about their expected grade, class level, GPA, and whether the course was required for their program. Some research has found that these variables are correlated with course ratings results. We will analyze student responses to these questions to identify any FIU patterns and determine their utility.
Individual Questions: Interpreting and Responding

As we mentioned above, student feedback is essential for reflecting on your course design and instructional practices. That does not mean, however, that the moment you first see the report is the ideal time to engage in this reflective process and try to get a better sense of what students may have been thinking or feeling as they completed their SPOTs. In other words, feel free to step away from your SPOTs results and come back to this guide in a couple of days.

When you’re ready, here are a few important reminders:

- Student perceptions of your teaching do not equal your teaching effectiveness; they’re perceptions, not assessments or evaluations. That’s why we changed the name to SPOTs!
- Again, your own perceptions of and reflections on your teaching are at least as important as students’ responses to the SPOT. If you haven’t done so already, consider taking a few moments to jot down what both what went well this term and aspects of the course(s) you would like to continue refining.
- If and when you encounter negative responses, resist the lure of the negative, reminding yourself that negative feedback tends to be “louder,” even when it’s not representative or legitimate. This blog post offers additional ways to “soothe the sting.”
- The SPOTs questions, as written, leave a lot to be desired, and it’s often hard to know what students were thinking as they completed the surveys. However, the research we describe that connects with each question will point you to evidence-based practices you can feel confident trying.

In this section, we explore each individual question: First, we offer an explanation, connecting each survey question to an aspect of designing or teaching a course, often offering our best guess as to what may have been going through students’ minds. Next, we’ve included a brief list of possible ways to respond that are informed by research on teaching and learning. Since there tend to be many relevant sources we could cite to support the teaching practices, we tried to choose the 1-3 we would most recommend reading and frequently linked to additional resources you can explore to inform specific aspects of teaching.
The Course Structure category consists of three questions:

**Description of Course Objectives and Assignments**

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of how clearly you communicated what they were supposed to do in the course (assignments) and why they were supposed to do it (objectives). Making learning objectives—both for the course overall and for specific assignments—as clear and explicit as possible helps students identify the skills they can develop and the knowledge they can gain by engaging in the course, and seeing value in the coursework increases their motivation (Ambrose, Lovett, Bridges, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010). In addition to clearly defining the purpose of assignments, clearly defining each task, the process for completing it, and the evaluation criteria can increase student success (Winkelmes et al., 2016).

Possible Ways to Respond

- To complement the course learning objectives included in all of our syllabi, articulating learning objectives for units/modules, assignments, and activities—on Canvas, on assignment descriptions, and in class—can help students see how these elements of the course help them build toward attainment of the course objectives.
- When communicating with students about learning objectives or the purpose of assignments, emphasize the knowledge and skills they can develop by engaging in coursework, as well as the relevance of the knowledge and skills to their lives.
- When revising assignment descriptions, the TILT Higher Ed project recommends clearly defining each task, the processes for completing the task, and the criteria for success.
- You can also ask students or colleagues for feedback on the clarity and usability of assignment descriptions.

**Expression of Expectations for Performance**

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of how clearly you communicated what they needed to do to succeed in the course. This may include the clarity of the relevant course policies (e.g., class participation, assignment completion, etc.) in the syllabus, as well as the clarity of the evaluation criteria for various coursework. Making your expectations as transparent as possible for students helps them to understand your priorities and adjust their efforts accordingly. It also gives them a clear picture of what success looks like before they begin work on each assignment (Winkelmes et al., 2016).

Possible Ways to Respond

- In your syllabus, describe course policies in a learning-centered way, using student-friendly language.
- In assignment descriptions, include evaluation criteria that define the characteristics of successful work.
- Give students opportunities to analyze or evaluate examples of student work, including by providing feedback to peers.
**Description of Grading Policies in the Course Syllabus**

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of your approach to grading in the course. It refers to the policies in the syllabus specifically, so students may think of how well they understood those policies, and they may also think about your approach to grading their coursework in general. The course grading scheme elicits both positive and negative emotions in students, and it also communicates how you expect students to spend their time in your course. The grading scheme is more than an explanation of the distribution of points; it provides students with valuable information about the importance or value you place on the work, where they should spend their time, and accomplish the most/deepest learning (Cavanagh, 2016; Cox, 2009).

Possible Ways to Respond

- Provide feedback and scores throughout the term (ideally, online, so they are readily accessible), and encourage students to monitor their grades throughout the semester.
- Create evaluation criteria (e.g., rubrics, specifications) that align with your goals for student learning. Then, use the criteria to grade, so that grades reflect student attainment of course goals.
- Make sure the grading scheme on your syllabus reflects your priorities around how students should spend their time in the course.
- In addition to including clear grading policies on the syllabus, you can also describe your approach to grading on assignment descriptions and in class.

In the **Learning Support** category, there are eight questions:

**Consistency in Following the Course Syllabus**

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of whether their experience taking the course matched the expectations they formed based on the syllabus. The syllabus sets the tone and nearly exclusively informs students’ first impression of you and the course (Davis, 2009; Ludy, Brackenbury, Folkins, Peet & Langendorfer, 2016). A syllabus that communicates clearly and consistently the course goals, purpose, value and criteria for success fosters trust and aides in rapport building—key ingredients for civility and learning (Ambrose et al., 2010; Bain, 2004).

Possible Ways to Respond

- **Teach transparently.** On the syllabus and in other course materials (e.g. on Canvas, in project descriptions, etc.), clarify your expectations and plans as much as possible for students, follow through as much as possible, and let students know the rationale behind the course design.
- When you need to make a change to the coursework or course schedule, do it in consultation with your students, revise all of the relevant documents, and make both verbal and written announcements to the class.
- Use the FIU Learning-Centered Syllabus Checklist in Appendix B to evaluate and refine your syllabus.
Preparation for Class & Use and Management of Class Time

These two questions seek to measure students’ perceptions of your effort and effectiveness in designing and facilitating learning experiences. Considering the reference to “class time,” these questions no longer reflect the various modalities in which we now teach; they are more relevant to face-to-face and hybrid courses. Until our instrument is revised to better reflect varied modalities, we can focus on the ways you design and pace learning activities, including in online courses. You can optimize instructional time by creating opportunities for students to actively engage in learning (Doyle, 2011), and by designing and facilitating activities that provide goal-directed practice paired with targeted feedback (Ambrose et al., 2010).

A note on the use of class time: We know that for FIU students, the classroom is the primary point of contact, meaning it is the site where students build skills, confidence, engagement, and supportive networks. These factors mean that the ways we use class time are particularly important on our commuter campus—even more so in a hybrid course, where the face-to-face time is reduced by half. When students see value in the in-class activities, they are also more likely to attend.

Possible Ways to Respond

- Set clear goals, and design and facilitate learning activities that help students accomplish those goals through practice and feedback.
- Let students know the purpose of the selection, design, and sequencing of activities.
- Gather feedback from students about the pacing of the activities so that you and they can adjust as needed.
- Create opportunities for students to interact and learn from one another.

Knowledge of Course Content & Communication of Ideas and Information

These two questions seek to measure students’ perceptions of your expertise in your subject area and your effectiveness as an interpreter of complex and often unfamiliar disciplinary language, concepts, and processes. Since students possess neither the disciplinary expertise nor sufficient evidence to assess your “knowledge of course content,” we suggest focusing on the ways you can make your field’s language, concepts, and processes as accessible as possible for students, which can be challenging work because of novice-expert differences. Novices tend to possess shallow knowledge of subject matter; their knowledge may contain both gaps and misconceptions, and it is organized differently than the knowledge of an expert (Willingham, 2010). The process of learning to think like an expert is slow and complex, so to effectively facilitate learning, experts must investigate and respond to the needs of novices.

A note on the professor’s role: The second question’s reference to “communication of ideas and information” may bring to mind images of “the sage on the stage” and classrooms where the professor’s role is solely to lecture; however, “fifteen years of neuroscience, biology, and cognitive psychology research findings offer this powerful and singular conclusion: It is the one who does the work who does the learning” (Doyle, 2011, p. 7). The benefits of active learning were most recently confirmed by the extensive meta-analysis conducted by Scott Freeman and colleagues (2014), including one of our very own DBER faculty, Sarah Eddy!

Even in a learning-centered class, where the professor’s role is to facilitate learning, and students spend most of their time “doing the work” (i.e., actively engaged in goal-directed practice), the professor’s communication of ideas and information is still critically important; we still need to clarify concepts, correct misconceptions,
review main points, articulate goals, describe expectations, provide targeted feedback, and write all sorts of
documents: syllabi, project descriptions, rubrics, exams, and more.

Possible Ways to Respond

● Explore your expert blind spots. What might you incorrectly assume students know or know how to do?
● Get to know your students. As you communicate—whether in person, online, or in writing—keep their
  needs in mind as much as possible.
● Identify and summarize main points, or ask students to identify and summarize main points and give
  them feedback on their accuracy.
● Use suitable examples, illustrations, and analogies to help students understand complex ideas.
● Request student feedback on the clarity of your communication.

Stimulation of Interest in the Course

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies you used to engage
and motivate them. Stimulating students’ interest contributes to their learning and success because it motivates
them to focus more on course content and engage more in coursework (Feldman, 2007).

Possible Ways to Respond

● Express your enthusiasm for your subject; enthusiasm is contagious.
● Help students explore the relevance of course content to their previous experiences, as well as to later
courses, a career, and/or civic life.
● Engage students in authentic learning experiences.
● Share ownership of the course. Present students with options that allow them to personalize their
  learning experiences and connect coursework with their interests.

Facilitation of Learning

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of how much you helped them learn. Since the question
prompts them to think about their learning, students may consider whether they feel they learned what you
communicated they should, as well as the significance of your role in their learning gains. Their perceptions of
the latter could involve anything from whether they feel they got enough helpful feedback to whether they feel
you directed them to suitable resources. Since learning is something that faculty can facilitate, but students
actually do, you can help improve student learning and success by teaching students strategies for becoming
more effective and self-regulated learners (McGuire, 2015; Nilson, 2013).
Possible Ways to Respond

● Explore the research on learning from a variety of disciplines. We now know more about how people learn than ever before.
● Use formative assessments to monitor students’ learning and adjust your teaching.
● Encourage students to track and reflect on their own learning.
● Teach students about effective strategies for learning in your course, based on the latest research on memory and cognition.
● Direct students to suitable tools and resources, and help them learn to use them well.

Provide Feedback about Your Performance

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of the amount and utility of your feedback. As they consider this question, they might think about whether they feel they received helpful feedback, whether they received the feedback in time to improve their performance on subsequent coursework, and whether the feedback was delivered with care. Targeted feedback is critical to learning because it informs students about how aspects of their performance compare to the criteria for success, as well as what they need to adjust to meet the criteria (Ambrose et al., 2010). Since providing feedback can be time-consuming for instructors and responding to an abundance of feedback can be overwhelming for students, it is essential to limit and prioritize feedback by creating a hierarchy of concerns (Bean, 2011).

Possible Ways to Respond

● Build opportunities for students to learn from feedback and improve their performance into your course design.
● Provided targeted feedback that is aligned with the learning goals of the assignment or activity.
● Use feedback as an opportunity to clarify goals, tasks, expectations, concepts, processes, and/or guidelines.
● Employ technology and time-saving strategies to provide feedback in large classes.
In the **Student - Instructor Interaction** category, there are four questions:

### Availability to Assist Students In or Out of Class

This question seeks to ascertain students’ perception of your accessibility. Effectively interacting and communicating with your students is essential to the learning process (Ambrose et al., 2010). Uninviting, inconsistent, or contradictory communication practices strain your relationship with your students, hinder the learning process, and limit students’ ability to achieve course goals (Bain, 2004; Cavanagh, 2016).

Possible Ways to Respond

- Consider setting **office hours** after the first day of class, with input from your students.
- Rename “office hours” to something that encourages students to take advantage of them (e.g. drop-in times, check-in times, consultations).
- Tell students the best way to communicate with you. Have an email and phone communication policy in your syllabus and be responsive.
- Give students the opportunity to meet with you right before and after class by arriving and or staying behind a few moments.

### Respect and Concern for Students

This question seeks to understand students’ perceptions of your desire to know and understand them and whether you care about their learning and overall well-being. Demonstrating respect and concern are necessary for cultivating a supportive classroom environment (Bain, 2004; Hammond, 2015; Weimer, 2014). A supportive classroom environment encourages student motivation and learning (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Possible Ways to Respond

- Familiarize yourself with the **unique strengths and needs of Latinx** and other populations of students at FIU (e.g. adult learners, first-generation, international, student athletes, etc.).
- Provide students with opportunities to participate in decision making around course policies, activities, and assignment deadlines.
- Facilitate a getting-to-know-you activity on the first day of class. Include questions that will help you find out about your student’s previous experience with the material; ask your students why they are taking your course, what they expect, and what topics they are anxious or hesitant about.
- Learn your students’ names and make every effort to pronounce their names correctly.
- Stay abreast of campus resources, activities and community events.
**Fairness of Instructor**

This question seeks to measure students’ perceptions of whether you provide all students access to opportunities, resources, and course materials that are consistent and respectful in their communication. Culturally responsive teaching reminds us that it is essential to create classroom environments that are “socially and intellectually safe” for students (Hammond, 2015). A perceived lack of fairness decreases feelings of safety, and the sense of community culturally-responsive teaching requires (Gay, 2000; Hammond, 2015).

Possible Ways to Respond

- Ask current and former students (and or learning assistants, department work-study students, graduate and teaching assistants) to provide feedback on the **tone of your course syllabus**.
- Work with your students to develop a class community with **ground rules** that communicate to everyone how to share, interact and communicate with each other.
- Invite colleagues to review your course goals and provide **feedback** on the purpose and value of course materials and assignments commenting on consistency and clarity.
- Seek support to develop the skills necessary to avoid and confront **microaggressions** and mitigate **stereotype threat**.

**Overall Assessment of Instructor**

Again, it is difficult to know what this question represents or how students interpret it. As they respond, they may be driven by their affective response to you, the course material, and/or their experience in the class. Some research suggests that the response to the “overall” or “global” question is a good proxy for students’ responses to the instructor, offers a good “summary” score; however, newer studies point out that the overall question may be “most likely to activate bias, because they leave it to the student to decide which of the many components of teaching, and teachers, are the most important to them” (Sprague, 2016). Ultimately, we know it may be tempting to look only at this question, but, if your interest is in enhancing your course design or instruction, we would point you to the more detailed questions above.

Possible Ways to Respond:

- Participate in department and university wide discussions on **pedagogy** and **learner-centered teaching practices**.
- Seek the support and advice of colleagues regarding your **course goals** and student learning.
- Ask students past and present for **feedback** on course structure, content and student learning.
- Invite department colleagues and or consultants from **CAT** to observe your course and provide feedback on student engagement and learning.
As mentioned above, we know finding out how students responded to us, our teaching practices, course content, etc. can be an emotional, sometimes overwhelming experience. Since this response is often heightened in the case of students’ written comments, here are a few more reminders (adapted from the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at Syracuse University):

- Students who are very satisfied or very dissatisfied generally provide written comments;
- Pressures unrelated to you or your course can influence student comments;
- Negative comments can trigger a myriad of emotions, so interpret and respond to them with caution; and
- Students do not usually write positive comments unless they mean them; consider them genuine reflections of their feelings about their experience in your course.

To help you to make the best use of the written comments, we recommend systematically organizing and analyzing them, much as we would do with other types of qualitative data. Here are two approaches you might take:

**Categorize Comments**

Read through all the comments and sort them into two categories (e.g. strengths and weaknesses), grouping together those that say nearly the same thing, with a list under each that begins with the most frequently made comment(s).

**Explore Connections**

Look to the written comments for insights on the responses to the 15 Likert-scale questions by comparing your students’ written comments with their responses to the forced choice questions. Reference any questions from the forced-choice portion of the SPOTs that relate to any of the issues raised in the student comments. If these questions received lower ratings, the negative comments may reflect a concern with that particular dimension of your teaching.

Syracuse University offers additional approaches to organizing and analyzing student comments in their guide to Interpreting and Using Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness.

**Overall Assessment of Student Comments**

Use the questions below to prompt your thinking about the overall message of your students’ comments:

- How do the students’ comments compare with other types of feedback you already have (i.e., nonverbal cues, student questions or concerns raised either in class or during office hours, attendance patterns)?
- Is there a pattern in the students’ comments? Does the pattern tell a story?
- Does your assessment of your teaching match that of your students? If not, why not?
**Next Steps**

After taking the time to reflect on your course(s), to engage with the new SPOTs dashboard, and to read some of the sections above pertaining to select survey questions, you may be wondering: What now? What might be the most productive ways to adjust my teaching?

Here’s one approach:

1. Isolate the questions for which students expressed some dissatisfaction or themes in the written comments that you too had identified as areas for improvement.
2. Review the “Possible Ways to Respond” provided above and select the strategy that seems most appropriate or useful for your teaching context.
3. Limit yourself to implementing 1 to 3 new strategies next semester.
4. Follow-up with an evaluation of their effectiveness--whether by checking in with students, sending them a quick survey, or reviewing next term’s SPOTs results.

**Mid-semester Feedback**

You may not want to wait until the end of each semester to find out how students are responding to you, your curriculum, course design, and/or instructional practices. That’s when mid-semester feedback comes in handy. As Laura McGrath explains, “mid-semester evaluations [are] a useful way to locate potential disconnects between what I think we’re doing, and what my students think we’re doing. I want to know what’s hitting home with them, and what’s totally falling flat.” Otherwise, she admits, “I make assumptions, I jump to conclusions, I screw up. Mid-semester evaluations help me get to know my class better, and offer a helpful corrective to my own biases. And every time, every single time, my students are insightful and kind and brave enough to call my attention to my oversights. Evaluating at mid-semester, rather than waiting until the course is over, gives me the opportunity to adjust my actions, and I am so grateful for the chance.”

There are many great templates available for mid-course evaluations, from self-mastery checks to stop-start-continue. There are just two important stipulations: They need to be anonymous, so students feel free to respond frankly (a Qualtrics survey can be a great option). And you’ll need to close the loop, addressing the results with your students and letting them know how you plan to make adjustments.

You can devise your own mid-term evaluations or invite CAT to your class, to spend about 20 minutes speaking to your students about how their learning experience is going. We will meet with you afterwards to confidentially discuss the responses and (if you’d like) help you determine how to proceed. To schedule a mid-semester evaluation, just email us at teach@fiu.edu.
Resources & Additional Support

If reading student feedback (or this guide) has inspired you to reflect on your teaching, work on some aspect of a course, or learn more about research on teaching and learning and the implications for the classroom, we encourage you to explore some of the resources available at FIU and online. All of FIU’s Teaching & Learning units and contacts are listed on our website, and several useful online resources are linked below. Of course, we always welcome you to attend a workshop, reading group, course design institute, or other programming available at CAT. Watch out for our teaching tips and calls for participants in your FIU email inbox!

If you would like to talk more or provide feedback on this guide, we would love to hear from you! Please stop by our office in PC 237 or email us at teach@fiu.edu.

Web Resources

We recommend visiting the Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University online, particularly their How to Solve A Teaching Problem site, which provides practical strategies for teaching problems across disciplines.

If you teach with writing, The WAC Clearinghouse, hosted by Colorado State University, is an invaluable resource: a searchable database of articles, e-books, and other resources on writing in any discipline.

Many of our favorite CAT book group selections are also now available as ebooks through FIU’s library, so even if you aren’t able to join us for a faculty reading or working group in person, you have free access to these great resources online. The links below will take you to the book’s library catalog page. To download the book, click “FIU users: view content here.” From there you’ll be directed to the library sign-on page. Enjoy!

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Recognizing the crucial role that teaching plays in student success, and the limitations of our current mechanisms for evaluating teaching, Provost Furton charged a committee with varied university representation to propose recommendations for a comprehensive teaching evaluation process, one that relies on more than students’ perceptions of teaching. The committee’s progress during the 17-18 academic year included:

- Expanding the Top Scholars program to include Teaching & Mentoring categories, and
- Collaborating with faculty leaders from six FIU departments in four colleges who are drafting a proposed revision of the way teaching is evaluated annually within their department.

Additionally, a subcommittee spent Spring 2018 analyzing our current SPOTs instrument and drafting proposed new items. As you may know, the instrument we currently use includes the following eight questions required by the State of Florida:

1. Description of course objectives and assignments
2. Expression of expectations for performance in this class
3. Communication of ideas and information
4. Stimulation of interest in course
5. Facilitation of learning
6. Availability to assist students in or out of class
7. Respect and concern for students
8. Overall assessment of instructor

The remaining seven, which are required by FIU, were developed by varied university committees and refined during the last decade or so:

1. Description of grading policies in the course syllabus
2. Consistency in following the course syllabus
3. Preparation for class
4. Use and management of class time
5. Knowledge of course content
6. Provide feedback about your performance
7. Fairness of instructor

Although we cannot make revisions to the state-mandated questions, we are able to revise the rest of the instrument so it better conforms to research-based standards. This will include removing some questions and adding others better aligned with our depiction of excellent teaching at FIU.

As we work to improve our survey, we will also be mindful of the limitations of course ratings systems. Supiano and Berrett (2017) capture three reasons many faculty object to or are dissatisfied with the process: Some of our colleagues would argue (and cite research suggesting) course ratings are a popularity contest or are prone to bias; others would question students’ ability to evaluate matters such as a faculty members’ knowledge
of the field; and as we’ve done at FIU, many would call attention to the fact that “these surveys are often used in tenure and promotion decisions and as proxies for really evaluating teaching and learning.” [For a summary of relevant research on course evaluations, you can explore this annotated bibliography compiled by our colleagues from the Professional and Organizational Development Network.] In addition to these objections, our Faculty Senate Online Review Committee and others have noted that the current survey does not reflect all of the modalities in which we now teach.

We also lack understanding around how students interpret the existing questions, what measurement scholars would call a lack of validity evidence based on response processes. As we revise the survey, we will heed the many studies of the limitations and biases of traditional student evaluations (e.g., Baldwin & Blattner, 2003), and we will seek FIU student input, facilitating think-alouds to hear how they interpret and process proposed questions. Ultimately, we will propose a revised instrument to collect useful information that students are capable of providing about their learning experiences, aiming for aspects of teaching that:

1. Students can accurately describe;
2. Are correlated with student learning, success, and satisfaction; and
3. Take into account modality (face-to-face, hybrid, or online) and variety in instructional styles.

We will also provide support for faculty and departmental leaders that will shed light on some of the limitations of our survey, note potential bias, and suggest ways to responsibly use the SPOTs results and avoid their misuse, particularly in high-stakes decisions involving promotions, merit pay, and contract renewal.

As Linse (2017) has affirmed, “Student ratings proponents and researchers unanimously recommend personnel decisions be based on more than just the faculty member’s student ratings... The most common additional sources of data about the faculty member’s teaching include written student feedback, peer and administrator observations..., internal or external reviews of course materials..., and more recently, teaching portfolios...and teaching scholarship” (p. 100).

As we work to improve the process of teaching evaluation, we remain committed to providing support for faculty and departmental leaders on using multiple measures of teaching effectiveness for decision-making purposes, and more importantly, to support our growth as teachers, a role in which we serve our students, our communities, and our fellow citizens.
References


Appendix A:

Strategies for Increasing Survey Response Rates

- **Monitor Response Rates:** You can view the response rates in your courses within the my.fiu.edu portal under your Faculty Center/Schedule link. To view the Faculty Response Rate Report tutorial, please [click here](#).

- **Remind students:** You can encourage students to complete SPOTS by reminding them in class, online, and by email.

- **Use a bit of class time:** In a face-to-face or hybrid course, you can ask students to take out their phones and navigate to the survey. Then, you can leave the room so they can complete it.

- **Explain the purpose:** Let students know why their feedback is important and how you use it to improve your courses.

- **Share instructions:** Help students understand how to access the survey.
  
  Here are the steps they need to take to complete their SPOTs:
  
  - Log on to MyFIU portal at [https://my.fiu.edu](https://my.fiu.edu).
  - Click on SPOTs.
  - Select the course from the list of SPOTs.
  - Click on the instructor's name.
  - You will now be on the form and can share your perceptions and type comments.

- **Make it an ungraded assignment:** In a web-assisted, hybrid, or online course you can make the survey an ungraded assignment in the LMS.

- **Offer the whole class extra credit based on the response rate:** For instance, when the response rate reaches 75%, you can award a limited number of points to the whole class.