

COMMENTARY

Perspectives from A Recently Graduated Pharmacy Student on Faculty and Course Evaluations

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Written primarily by a recent pharmacy school graduate, this commentary aims to express the perceptions of faculty and course evaluations that students may often hold. Colleges and schools of pharmacy utilize many different systems to administer and assess evaluations. While there is a plurality of literature relating to these forms of evaluation, almost no pieces exist that reflect the opinions of those actually completing the evaluations: students. Explaining the purpose and utilization of evaluations, how to correctly complete evaluations, and the vulnerability and receptivity of professors, as well as other factors, impact how students perceive and complete their evaluations. It is worthwhile to gather students' perspectives on evaluations as these assessments hold the potential to drive curricular change and faculty promotion. Considering students perspectives can help colleges and schools design and administer evaluations, increasing the predictive capabilities and utility of these assessments.

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Throughout pharmacy school I was persistently plagued with a dilemma at the end of each semester: completing my faculty and course evaluations. The dilemma was not from a lack of opinion or a plethora of robust courses at my college of pharmacy, but rather due to my perception of these evaluations. I had been completing these types of evaluations since enrolling in undergraduate studies, usually to express the extremes of my opinions. If a professor had gone above and beyond in their teaching efforts or a course was particularly well organized, I took time to mention this and construct words of praise, hoping that it may lead to an award or promotion. Alternatively, if I had perceived a professor's instruction or course as ineffective or lacking, I would offer constructive criticism and express where changes could be instituted. This was all done in hopes that I was presenting valuable opinions to the individual faculty member and whoever else might be reading the evaluation. It recently dawned on me that my practices and perceptions surrounding evaluations were challenged during pharmacy school, especially since they were required for course completion. Now that I have graduated, it is time to evaluate the evaluations.

There is a plurality of literature relating to the design and administration of evaluations.¹⁻⁴ While many researchers correctly identify factors that impact the completion rate and quality of evaluations, such as requiring participation, time of year the evaluation is administered, and number of evaluations the student has to complete, several leave out important details that students often consider. One of the most important factors is that of the purpose and utilization of the evaluations. Each semester I, and several classmates, would question what the evaluations were actually being used for. Did these evaluations contribute to promotions or terminations? Were courses actually changed following constructive feedback? These questions link directly with a student's willingness to complete evaluations. Evaluations are often lengthy and may require significant time for a student to complete. With this in mind, a commitment to quality evaluations from students may be lacking if they do not comprehend the value in the process.

As a student I always wanted tangible examples of how evaluations were used. Colleges and schools should find ways to showcase what curricular changes, faculty advancements, and course improvements resulted because of feedback gathered from evaluations. Examples of this could include explaining to students how a course instituted new material as a result of student evaluations, or how the course no longer requires a specific assignment due to recurrent themes within

evaluations. When this messaging is present, students are more apt to invest time in writing constructive and in-depth evaluations. I also often questioned who actually read the evaluations, as well. Are evaluations being read by only professors, or does the department chair, administrative staff, and dean read them as well? Knowing this information only strengthens students' understanding of evaluations as well as their desire to complete them. Robust communication regarding evaluations has to be present at all levels of the institution. Administrators must be willing to analyze and utilize evaluations in meaningful ways in order to garner an authentic commitment from both faculty and students.

On almost every evaluation I completed I thought to myself, am I doing this correctly. As mentioned previously, I, and most classmates, came into pharmacy school having already completed evaluations at our previous undergraduate institutions. This prior experience, however, does not make students evaluation experts. Very few times across my educational journey was instruction provided on what valuable feedback looked like and how to construct it, especially in written forms. While the importance of completing evaluations is often stressed throughout pharmacy school (tied course/degree completion, a factor in accreditation, etc.), very few times is the *how* considered. Most classmates, including myself, often only express what the "favorite" or "least favorite" elements of the course or instructor had been on the evaluations; seldom are there supported recommendations on how to continue excellent teaching or how to amend poor practices. While these shallow details can be somewhat helpful for professors, evaluations that include constructive criticism, thoughtful reflection, and documentation of specific teaching practices are more likely to reveal useful insights. Poor completion rates and/or quality of evaluations may be related to a student's misconceptions about evaluations while also being linked to previously mentioned factors, such as well-being, evaluation length, time of year, etc. It is critical that colleges of pharmacy, and essentially all institutions, take time to educate students on how to provide effective feedback and evaluate what environments facilitate successful and insightful completion. As colleges look to hire or utilize curricular specialists, administrative staff, and pedagogists, the responsibility of teaching and facilitating evaluation completion should be formally assigned and the purpose and utilization of evaluations should be included in strategic plans. Additionally, students should have a designated person who they can consult regarding evaluations. When colleges and faculty become intentional about evaluations, so do students.

Some academicians may claim that evaluations are simply "popularity contests," and that only the well-liked professors and courses receive evaluations and/or positive comments. After completing seven years of higher education, I can certainly see where this would be the case and have fallen victim to this myself. While popularity increases the chances of completion and positive remarks, it would also be disingenuous to completely discount the opinions and observations of learners.⁴ As others have aptly pointed out asking a student to quantify how much they have learned across an entire semester is a difficult proposition at best.⁴ It is more prudent to ask: what increases popularity? When professors expressed empathy, vulnerability, compassion, or even humor, students such as myself were able to develop amiable perceptions and connections with these professors. In turn, these were often the first professors that I and others would complete evaluations for, simply based off of the principle that it is easy to construct responses of affirmation and praise rather than to write about negative experiences. While evaluations for these types of professors tend to be positive in nature, this can be explained by fact that the positive qualities expressed by professors often open the door for honest, constructive feedback. It is much more than "popularity" that convinces students to complete evaluations and provide feedback, rather the qualities of a professor nurturing and facilitating successful evaluation. Through my experiences, the qualities that made a professor "likeable" also translated to effective teaching. It is easier to learn from a professor expressing the aforementioned qualities due to the positive learning environment created. The reverse can also hold true, as well. As professor's express frustration, anger, and confusion, these instances are often remembered and factored into end of course evaluations. Does this mean that students expect professors to be perfect and never 'mess up' in the classroom? This simply cannot and should not be the case. These types of attitudes and behaviors, however, must be recognized as ones that can hinder effective teaching as well as the completion and quality of evaluations.

Administrators and faculty alike should not unilaterally and naively discount all elements of teaching and course evaluations. These instruments should be treated cautiously and with a critical eye. They might not measure exactly how much learning occurred in a classroom but they may offer insight into faculty that are able to transmit a passion for knowledge, that are able to generate enthusiasm for their subject matter, and that are able to instill in students a spark or desire to know more about a given subject matter or topic. The most thoughtful and descriptive evaluations I completed were for teachers who had the vulnerability to admit mistakes or shortcomings and an explicit drive to perform better. When professors included us on their instructional journey, we were able to engage with and evaluate them and their courses more honestly and critically. It is difficult to envision any student wanting to learn more about a topic or advance their knowledge of a subject matter following displeasing experiences with that course content. Rather than limiting their focus on popularity

among students, professors should strive to emulate characteristics that facilitate open, honest communication. This mindset will lead to not only completion of evaluations by students, but quality feedback, regardless of whether a professor is liked or not.

Faculty and course evaluations are subjects of extensive debate and literature. While these tools are often used for faculty promotion and curricular change, it is vital to understand that no evaluative tool alone is completely reflective of a faculty member of course. Considering students' biases and fallacies sheds light on a limitation of evaluations. As I have committed time and effort to understanding my unconscious biases in recent years, I have discovered that these very biases could have been and were likely present in evaluations. I now wonder how student biases affect faculty and courses at all colleges of pharmacy employing student evaluations. This makes it important for colleges to invest time and resources into these insightful tools. Is it appropriate to apply the same assessment tools to a wide array of professors and courses? And how can this be done without educating students on what is important to consider and express as well as the purpose of these assessments? Colleges must be willing to consider students' views, like the ones presented here, in order to understand and improve the assessment provided by evaluations. When this is done, evaluations can be combined with other proven methods of assessment to enhance and improve student learning.

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