

More on the Course Surveys

The August, 2010 issue of the Notices carried an Opinion Column I wrote entitled "Evaluation of Our Courses." My main point is that we math profs don't get fairly evaluated. Something gets done, as we know; it is only what is easy to carry out. By doing only that, we tacitly assert our acceptance of the students' point of view on education in college.

The survey outcomes are used in some places as professional evaluation, and that is a serious problem. This is independent of the sporadic statements that students make in the written commentary. (I agree with what Martin Scharlemann wrote in his Letter-to-the-Editor in the November, 2010 issue of the Notices, that the more sober comments can be helpful.)

I'd like to draw the reader's attention to the study that can be found at URL:

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/653808>

It is a carefully controlled study that demonstrates the negative correlation between good survey scores for the instructor in one semester, and good learning by the students in the next.

As for myself, I get so-so survey scores, but it has been long reported that my students are better prepared. I elect to put a lot of the burden of learning on them, and I find that appropriate at JHU. Maybe I should be less demanding? Once I said to my class, probably near the midpoint of the semester, "I'll run the lectures any way you want." Many hands went up. "But it won't change the scope of the course nor the nature of the exams." All hands went down.

Michael Fried is reporting on his experience in the opposite direction. When he found a way to improve his students' engagement in their learning, his survey ratings suffered greatly.

Sincerely,

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