

# The Faculty Course Questionnaire and the Graduate Instructor

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A university-wide program, the Faculty Course Questionnaire (FCQ) is administered to students in all courses. Each semester, GPTIs and TAs as well as regular faculty members are evaluated by their students on a number of course-related items. Although the tests are scored electronically, students may also fill out written comments on the backs of the evaluation forms. The forms, scored electronically by the Office of Research and Testing, are returned to the instructor early in the semester following the one in which the evaluation was administered.

The Faculty Course Questionnaire can be valuable to GPTIs and TAs in assessing their teaching effectiveness. The following question/answer discussion is presented in order to increase graduate teachers' understanding of the format, administration, and results of the FCQ, as well as to provide suggestions for using the results of the FCQ to improve teacher performance in the classroom.

## **To whom are the results of the FCQ useful?**

The FCQ results can provide information to students choosing courses and professors; to administrators making course assignments, and salary and promotion decisions; and to teachers revising their courses.

## **How do students access the results of the FCQ?**

The results of the FCQ are published by the University of Colorado Student Union each fall and spring semester in a book called *Professor Performances*. This booklet is made available to all students on campus during registration so that students can have some notion about the quality of the courses they choose to take and the effectiveness of the instructors teaching those courses.

## **How do administrators use the information from the FCQ?**

The FCQ results help administrators make decisions on teaching load, tenure, and hiring. Engineering and CU Continuing Education programs specifically use it for hiring purposes. Possibilities for department chairs and graduate instructors using the results include placement of graduate students in teaching positions and commenting on a graduate student's teaching when they are called upon to write a recommendation. The FCQ results are also taken into consideration when graduate students are nominated for various awards and fellowships, including the Teaching Excellence awards.

### **How can faculty, including graduate teachers, use the FCQ to best advantage?**

The most valuable attribute of the FCQ is its potential to serve as a resource to help individual instructors improve their teaching performance. The FCQ is designed to help teachers recognize their classroom strengths and weaknesses. Upon receiving the results of the FCQ, an instructor should be able to evaluate what actually happened in the classroom and use that information to make necessary adjustments in such areas as course organization, fairness of grading, and the like.

### **How can teachers use the FCQ ratings to improve their performance in the classroom?**

It's very important for teachers to examine the results and to ask themselves, "Why did I get this rating?" It is also important not to dismiss or overemphasize a small percentage of either positive or negative responses and comments made by students. Instructors should look at comments that most of the answers have in common and not take a few derisive comments seriously. They need first of all to sort out legitimate statements from those in which the student has vented anger, which is possibly displaced hostility.

Graduate students who have questions about how to interpret the results or who need help in deciding how to improve in a certain area can contact the Graduate Teacher Program, 492-4902.

### **Do graduate teachers have a choice about what questions will be asked on their FCQ?**

The first 12 questions are standard on all FCQ forms so that sections and classes can be compared with similar ones. In addition, all FCQ forms include three standard open-ended items which are printed on the back of the form. There are also questions called "mandatory optionals," that are required by individual departments.

Further, up to 24 optional questions can be chosen from the question bank provided by the Office of Research and Testing or can be composed by the instructors themselves. These items enable instructors to focus on areas of specific interest to them, and can be used to define and expand the questionnaire and to fill in gaps in the general form.

### **How can instructors ensure that their students take the evaluations seriously and fill out the FCQ forms thoroughly and accurately?**

The process for administering the questionnaire is designed to enhance the chances for students to take it seriously. The instructor chooses one of the students in the class to administer the FCQ. Before students begin filling in the form, the instructor must leave the room. The student administrator then reads directions to the rest of the class; these directions are not only logistical ones, but also stress the importance of student evaluation and reiterate that the instructor is not to be in the room at any time. The student in charge then takes the FCQ packet to the relevant department. Thus students have no fear of reprisal through lower grades for the ways in which they evaluate their instructors.

Instructors can also emphasize how seriously they themselves take the results of the FCQ and how they look at all comments when planning their courses. It is also advisable for instructors to announce the date for the FCQ at least twice in the week prior to administration and to stress the importance of all students being present.

### **Is the FCQ a complete rating of teaching ability?**

Obviously no. The FCQ indicates how students rate the teacher, what they think about the course, and what they feel they have learned. It is not a complete rating of teaching ability nor is it a direct rating of what students actually learned. Because the FCQ is just one piece of information, it should be used only in conjunction with other forms of evaluation such as departmental and/or peer evaluation.

**Are student evaluations accurate?**

Students are good evaluators because they have the greatest opportunity to see the instructor in action. Studies have shown that, in general, students can accurately assess the effectiveness of an instructor's course organization and the methods of instruction as well as how much they have learned in the course. Some students, however, use the "revenge factor" when filling out the form. Although the rating and comments are accurate to that particular student, it's very difficult to sort a derisive comment from the more accurate ones.

**What problems have been solved by the FCQ?**

Students have been given a voice. They have the opportunity to comment on their education and to know that these comments are taken seriously by all levels of university administration as well as by their fellow students.

**What problems have been caused by the FCQ?**

The fairness issue is always a question. Do easy graders get higher ratings? Although the literature says the opposite, it seems plausible that a teacher who gives high marks probably gets high marks. Students who get "A's" simply do not often think of their instructor as a "D." The temptation is for the instructor to accommodate himself or herself to the FCQ. Morale problems are also a concern. The conscientious teacher who doesn't get as high marks as the less conscientious teacher can often feel that the effort put into teaching is not worthwhile.

**What is the general view of the FCQ by students? By faculty?**

A lot of students take the time to answer the questions thoroughly on the back of the form. There are always students who realize they've made a mistake in marking and contact the Office of Research and Grants to ask to correct their form. These incidents show that many students take the FCQ quite seriously and understand its importance to instructors. However, the 40 percent response rate suggests that almost half of the student population needs to be aware that their voice is important. Faculty mostly feel ambiguous about the FCQ. Because it is used in hiring and promotion decisions there is often a love-hate response to the form. Most faculty, however, take it very seriously when evaluating their own teaching performance.