

Low grades prompt criticism of professors; U of O researcher urges universities to discount ratings

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University professors have long suspected that students they assign a low grade get revenge by giving them a lousy rating on university evaluations or popular online sites such as ratemyprofessors.com. Now, new research by University of Ottawa professor Tracy Vaillancourt has backed up those suspicions.

In the first study of its kind, Vaillancourt - the Canada Research Chair in Children's Mental Health and Violence Prevention - found that students who received poor grades were 10 to 19 times more likely to make negative comments about their evaluator than those who received high grades.

The finding is important because student evaluations can have a major impact on a professor's career, Vaillancourt said. "They factor heavily into decisions about tenure and promotion. In fact, for professors who aren't researchers, it can become the decision-maker."

Vaillancourt has won two teaching awards and is regularly rated highly by most of her students. Even so, "every year you still get a terrible comment that throws you back," she said.

"My suspicion has always been that it's the one student that you gave the B minus to. Now this study shows empirically that, yes, they are connected."

The findings demonstrate that student evaluations are biased and that favourable evaluations "can be bought with high grades," Vaillancourt writes in an article published this week by the journal *Aggressive Behavior*.

"Given the trend toward grade inflation seen over the past few decades, it is likely that many professors have already capitalized on this relationship without the benefit of these results," she writes.

To test her hypothesis that poor teaching evaluations are a form of revenge, Vaillancourt designed three related studies, each involving between 150 and 176 mostly first-year university students.

Students were given up to 20 minutes to write a short essay on an assigned topic, and were told their work would be graded by professors or teaching assistants. The essays were then randomly assigned a high or low grade and, in some cases, comments such as "No suggestions, great essay!" or "This is one of the worst essays I have ever read!"

Students were then asked to provide feedback to their evaluator about his or her marking ability, fairness, helpfulness and general competence.

In the first study, participants given poor marks and negative comments were almost 10 times more likely to rate their evaluator harshly than those given high marks and positive comments.

It also found that students' level of self-esteem influenced their ratings. Among those whose essays received low marks and negative comment, high self-esteem was associated with the lowest evaluations. Conversely, those with high self-esteem who received positive feedback from their evaluators rated them the highest.

The second study measured whether the student evaluations were influenced by the rank of their evaluator - professor or teaching assistant - and the students' level of self-esteem and narcissism.

If found that narcissism and the rank of the evaluator had no effect on the students' ratings, but replicated the first study's findings about the effect of self-esteem.

The third study provided five different types of feedback to the students: negative and positive grades, with no comment; negative and positive grades with harsh comments or praise; and a negative grade tempered with praise and encouragement.

In this study, participants were asked to complete a survey about their experience and feelings about the feedback they received.

"Results confirmed that the more negative the feedback participants received, the more they found it to be negative, threatening, malicious and unfair, and the more they felt angry, unhappy, embarrassed, stupid and discouraged," Vaillancourt writes.

Buffering the ego blow of a low grade with praise did not change the way students rated their professor, Vaillancourt found, concluding that grades themselves were the most salient factor.

The paper concludes that students were between 10 and 19 times more likely to provide negative feedback to their evaluator when they got bad marks or criticism than when they got good marks and praise.

The finding that grades matter more than feedback is "problematic," Vaillancourt observes, because many professors and teaching assistants make a concerted effort to provide feedback that students can learn from. The results imply that "once a poor grade is received, the feedback is all but ignored and the focus is on the grade."

Vaillancourt hopes her findings will convince universities to ignore or discount student evaluations when assessing the work of faculty.

While universities aren't allowed to consider marks and comments on ratemyprofessors.com, which has 13 million comments about 1.7 million professors, they maintain internal evaluation systems that are very similar. "Universities stand behind them as being valid, and most professors would argue that they're not," Vaillancourt said.

Ratemyprofessors.com is embarrassing for many professors because the evaluations are so public and often inflammatory, she said. "People Google me from high school and find my page and think I'm terrible at what I do."

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