Providing Feedback to Your Faculty

The Fall 2014 semester is almost over. Classes are done, but final projects and exams still loom in the not-too-distant future. I want to remind you (again; I know that you have received email from me about this) that you have one more obligation to your courses and faculty: You need to complete course evaluations! While they may not be listed on course syllabi as requirements, they are an important part of your obligations.

Just as you expect (and, I hope, receive) thoughtful feedback on your work from your instructors, your faculty expect thoughtful feedback from you on the courses they teach. Were the learning objectives of the course clear? How well did the various components of the course fit together? Did assignments support the learning objectives? Were you able to discern the most important themes of the course? Did you receive adequate feedback on your work to help you improve on future assignments? Did the course move at an appropriate pace to support your learning? It would be easy to go on and list additional questions, but the most important message here is that faculty members revise their courses from year to year. They also draw on their experience teaching past courses when designing new courses. They need to know what works and what doesn’t. It is your responsibility to tell them. It is key to meeting the goal of continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and course offerings at Case Western Reserve University, which the Faculty Senate established as the primary purpose of course evaluations in January 2013.

I often hear from students that it is not worth their time to complete evaluations because they do not see the changes they hoped for in the way courses are structured and taught. At the same time, I hear from faculty members their concern about the low response rate. Let me assure you that faculty members are eager to get this feedback and are disappointed when students do not respond or do not take the time to write thoughtful comments.

I suppose the interesting question is why there is this disconnect. Two thoughts come to mind. First, there are often many students in a course and the feedback is not always consistent across all or most students. It may be hard to know whether to make a change. I have heard reports of faculty who have made lists of comments side by side that are totally in opposition in terms of what the students liked and didn’t like about the course. Students are different in terms of their goals and learning styles, so what works well for one may not work for another. Even when your feedback is given careful consideration, it may not lead to the change you hoped for.

My second thought is that faculty rarely do a complete overhaul of their courses (though some do as we have seen with experiments with flipped classrooms in the last year or two). More often, we tinker from year to year in response to the feedback we get and what we observe in the classroom and in student work. In my own case teaching intermediate microeconomic theory, I have over time adjusted the order of topics, added numerical and real world examples to my lectures (though probably not as many as my students would like), added sessions to practice problems that help bridge the gap between my more theoretical lectures and more problem-oriented homework and exams, and restructured problem sets. I’ve been teaching this material for a very long time and this did not all happen at once. It was a more evolutionary process, but definitely one that was informed by the annual course evaluations that students filled out.
One more thing to keep in mind when completing your course evaluations is the old saying that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Be sure to compliment what is working well, while also pointing out what can be improved. Be specific and constructive. As I regularly tell students in my classes, writing about the course “It sucked!” doesn’t tell me what to do to make it suck less. Effective feedback from faculty to students is specific and recognizes both strengths and weaknesses. The same is true of the feedback you provide your faculty.

So I urge you to take advantage of the opportunity to submit course evaluations. You have until the end of the day on Monday, December 8, the first Reading Day. Think of it as a community responsibility to help make the academic experience of undergraduates at CWRU even better than it already is. You can then go into your final exams with a clear conscience that you have done what is expected of you (at least on that score!).

I hope your final exams and projects go well, and that you are then rewarded with a restful and joyous holiday season and winter break.

*Let me know what you think. You can write to me at jeffrey.wolcowitz@case.edu.*