



T: 800.255.2757

T: 785.320.2400

IDEAedu.org

301 South Fourth Street, Suite 200

Manhattan, KS 66502-6209

Evidence on How to Improve Student Ratings of Instruction

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Guest blog by **Matthew Anderson**
Rush University

As an avid sports fan, I am excited that the beginning of football season is finally upon us. Each year, I often find myself playing “armchair quarterback”, voicing my opinions on what the players or coaches should have done differently. An external observer might even assume I have a wealth of insider knowledge and evidence regarding game strategy (which, of course, I don’t).

It strikes me that a similar process occurs within higher education. Deans, department chairs, and even faculty peers often play “armchair quarterback”, offering suggestions to course directors on how to improve their instruction without much real evidence to support their claims. Despite their best intentions, these individuals may actually end up misleading the recipients of their anecdotal wisdom.

Rather than continue to conjecture about the best ways to improve courses, we decided to investigate what specific teaching methods *actually* predicted higher student ratings of instruction. Rush University implemented the IDEA course evaluations in 2009, and the wealth of data collected from our students allowed us to test the hypothesis that student ratings of the five consolidated teaching methods (stimulating student interest, fostering student collaboration, establishing rapport, encouraging student involvement, and structuring classroom experiences) are, in fact, predictive of student ratings of course excellence, teacher excellence, and progress on relevant objectives.

After conducting three forward, stepwise multiple regression analyses, we were excited to find three very compelling statistical models. “Stimulating student interest” was the strongest predictor of both “excellent course” and “progress on relevant objectives”, while “structuring classroom experiences” was the strongest predictor of “excellent teacher”. The regression models explained between 58-67% of the variance in the dependent variables, indicating that student perceptions of teacher behaviors are related to student progress and teaching excellence.

Furthermore, we stripped down the analyses to the zero-order correlations of all 20 specific teaching methods and styles contained in the IDEA course evaluation. Three of the five strongest correlates with “excellent course”, for example, were “introducing stimulating ideas about the subject”, “demonstrating importance of the subject matter”, and “stimulating students to intellectual effort beyond that required by most courses”. Each of these teaching methods falls within the “stimulating student interest” consolidated teaching method, which was the strongest predictor of “excellent course”. The results were similar for the zero-order correlations of teaching methods and styles with “excellent teacher” and “progress on relevant objectives”. The full results of our study were recently published in the *Journal of Allied Health*, and you can see all of the data at the citation listed below.¹

Even though there is probably no silver bullet for delivering the perfect course, we at least have some data to support the suggestions we make to our faculty members in the College of Health Sciences at Rush for improving their student ratings of instruction. Hopefully the efforts to move toward evidence-based educational practices will continue, and the “armchair quarterbacks” will be relegated for duty only on Sunday afternoons during football season.

1. Anderson M. M., Shelledy D.C. (2013). *Predictors of student satisfaction with allied health educational program courses*. *Journal of Allied Health*, 42(2), 92-98.