

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the University Course Survey

Who has been working on this project? When did it start?

The University Course Survey working group website at <http://go.augsburg.edu/wg2017> fully details who has been involved and what the work has been since 2017.

What questions are on the proposed form?

A sample of the form is available at <http://web.augsburg.edu/it/evals/UCS-last-draft.pdf>.

What is the proposal that the faculty will be voting on?

The proposal from the Sept 12 faculty meeting is at <http://web.augsburg.edu/it/evals/course-survey-09-12-18.pdf>.

Why is this proposed form asking students about their experiences in courses?

This proposed course feedback survey was designed with the explicit purpose to provide reliable and valid data on students' perceptions of course experiences.

You will notice that none of the questions ask students to rate the instructor. Instead, the course itself and the students perception of their experience is the focus of their ratings. Much research has found that ratings of instructors are often negatively impacted by gender and race biases (see, for example, [here](#)¹, [here](#)², or [here](#)³). In lieu of measures that require students to judge faculty members as a person, we opted to focus on the tangible outcomes of their course preparation, design, and delivery methods, and how these influence course experiences as a whole.

We also think that the University is responsible for knowing if fundamental expectations of our promise to students are being met. If there are patterns over time of issues or problems, these data provide a pathway for identification, future investigation, and change. The goal is to sustain and improve the student course experience.

¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10755-014-9313-4>

² <https://www.scienceopen.com/document?vid=818d8ec0-5908-47d8-86b4-5dc38f04b23e#cit0002>

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1304016>

How did you select the questions about the student experience?

The committee worked with Student Government to ask what the students wanted the institution to know about their experiences in a class. They also went to the Gage Center staff to ask what students share with them about classroom experiences. Using this information, the individual committee members all designed questions. As a group we reviewed all of our questions and designed the final course survey.

What about student learning? What about evaluating the faculty member's teaching?

The research in this area shows these instruments typically attempt to measure one or more of the following:

- Student learning
- Teaching pedagogy or practice
- Student experience

The research also shows that instruments that try to measure multiple items on the above list typically do so poorly. The working group decided that the best solution for Augsburg is to measure only student experience in courses based on their reported perceptions. The other two goals should also be met, but do not need to be gathered and processed at a university wide level. Rather, individual and departmental level practices--surveys, peer review, assessment of student learning, and faculty development activities--are better suited to those needs.

But I or my department wants to measure something else. How can I do that?

That need is why the working group is recommending additional practices to measure things that the University-wide form is not going to measure. Those practices are *mid-course corrections*, delivered by the faculty, and *customized course forms*, delivered by the faculty. We have already confirmed with CTL that forms designed for specific purposes would be resourced on the website. We also think that many faculty already collect course specific data and for some topics the faculty member knows best what they need feedback on. Help in formatting the instrument can be provided.

Why do the questions have such binary answers and not 1-5 scales like the current form?

The proposed form is meant to track patterns over time and raise flags in areas of concern. It is not a diagnostic tool to determine what or how much a concern may be. The assumption is that a faculty member would reflect on feedback and examine their practices and that the department chair would have a conversation with a faculty about the trends over time.

Scale measures are often poor indicators of performance. When asking students to provide ratings in an ordinal scale, the resulting data is often misleading and uninformative. For example, an item that receives exclusively "1's" and "5's" would produce an average rating of "3". This average mischaracterizes the data,

making it appear that the majority of the students gave the item an average rating. In such a case, the frequency of each rating (i.e., the number of “1’s” and “5’s” received) is a better indicator of student responses.

Moreover, averaging the scale items leads to mean response ratings that are very similar across faculty (e.g., “4’s”), with relatively similar variability, making it difficult to determine if there is a real difference from one faculty member to the next. Given that interpreting the results of scale measures already requires evaluating the frequencies of each response, the proposed form seeks to collect more accurate data that is easier to interpret. Determining the proportion of students who said “Yes” or “No” to the proposed items is a straightforward approach to identifying patterns in course delivery from semester to semester.

Why is there only one open-ended question instead of five?

The research shows that open-ended questions are areas where bias appears towards women and faculty of color. This is something Augsburg is committed to minimizing, so only a single open-ended question is provided. It was also confusing on the current form when students repeated the same comment over and over. That said, it is important for students to have the opportunity to comment freely on issues raised by their courses. The space given will allow them to reflect on any of the survey items that they choose, or to add any additional reflections.

In the course comparison question, how can students compare courses between disciplines?

In designing a survey to evaluate student experiences, it is critical to create questions that can be relevant to students from across campus who are at all stages of their undergraduate degrees. The domains that are addressed in this question (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics and statistical analysis) are core skills that are found in many majors, even though they are often taught in discipline-specific ways. Asking the students to compare, for example, the amount of reading that was expected is valuable information, even if the content of the readings they are assigned varies between disciplines.

Asking students to only compare a particular course to those within the same discipline raises challenges that are not easily addressed. For example, how would a first-year or transfer student compare a course to others in that discipline if they had not yet taken other classes within that domain, or at that course level? A narrow comparison between a course to only those in the discipline would result in less frequent feedback, as it would increase the number of students who would not be able to make such a comparison. In cases where a department would like to know more about how the workload varies between courses in their discipline, we recommend surveying students using a customized form as a part of ongoing departmental assessment practices.

Won't the course comparison question make my course look bad if it doesn't include one or more of these elements?

There is, by necessity, much variability between the pedagogical methods that are common within departments and programs. It is not expected that every class is designed to feature each of the skill domains. The course comparison questions were designed to include answers for “not sure” and “not applicable” for these cases.

These comparisons are intended to give faculty a big-picture view of how the work that they require is viewed by students relative to their other coursework. For example, if one is teaching a writing- and reading-intensive course, feedback from students that the amount of reading and writing assigned was below the typical amount expected would help inform the faculty member's decisions about the course workload; feedback that students report not using mathematical skills in the class would have no bearing on course design if it is not a focus of the course.

What system will be put in place for the individual and departmental level feedback?

The working group has brought forward a complete proposal for student feedback, including the expectation that faculty will provide 5-8 minutes of class time to increase student response rates (faculty leave the room because participation is voluntary for this form). It is possible to simply recommend that practice since departments that did not follow it would be at a deficit if they failed to collect data or perhaps the faculty will like to vote on a motion requiring departments to collect their own feedback.