

SAIs Possibly Under Fire

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by

To some students at East Tennessee State University, Student Assessment of Instruction surveys are not the most accurate representation of ETSU's instructors.

SAIs, as they are known, are surveys that each student is asked to fill out at the end of each semester. These assessments ask students to rate each instructor. They ask students to detail each instructor's strengths and weaknesses alike.

According to the ETSU Factbook, as of 2018 ETSU had roughly 100 professors and teachers employed that instructor a variety of different classes. This makes it difficult for ETSU department chairs to assess each instructor and each class individually.

Do students give accurate representation of their instructors on the SAIs?

ETSU's Assistant Director of Assessment Leigh Lewis handles all things pertaining to the SAIs. Lewis feels that the SAIs provide an accurate representation of instructors at ETSU.

"We moved to an online version of SAIs in Fall 2013," said Lewis. "Previously, the SAIs were done in paper version and were basically handed out in class and students maybe felt like they were forced to take them. Sometimes they would just go through and mark all positive statements," she said. "I think now that they're online, students who feel very strongly one way or another are completing them and giving fairly accurate information."

Even though she believes the SAIs do give accurate information, Lewis does see a problem arising.

"Unfortunately, in some cases, faculty members end up getting student results only from students that feel negatively," she said.

Lewis was unable to confirm or deny whether the SAI program was in jeopardy of being shut down. However, she said even if the SAI program were shut down, they would immediately be replaced by a different form of instructor assessments. Lewis said that ETSU requires there to be a form of communication between the students and the faculty.

Some instructors at ETSU have strong opinions on the subject. Sara Job, who has been a psychology instructor at ETSU for two years is not fond of SAI content or results.

"Generally, SAIs aren't that helpful. They don't ask the question I really want to have the answers to," said Job.

Since Job does not agree with the questions asked on the SAIs, she takes matters into her own hands. She makes her own evaluations, which she asks her students to fill out in order to better understand how to improve as an instructor.

Job also believes that the information received from the SAIs contains student biases.

"Additionally, there's some research in psychology that suggests that SAIs are often influenced by prejudicial attitudes (e.g. sexism, racism) and how attractive the professor is perceived by the students," said Job. "This basically means that the SAIs may not always accurately assess teaching effectiveness, but rather how liked the professor is by students."

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According to a 2013 paper published by researchers at the University of British Columbia for the school’s Student Evaluation of Teaching Committee, many causes lead to student biases on instructor evaluations. The paper introduces three categories of causation, student variables (things likely to change), instructor variables and course variables.

One of the researchers spotlighted in this paper is Dr. Ginni Blackhart. Dr. Blackhart is a psychology professor at ETSU. She conducted research on student assessment of teachers in 2006.

Dr. Blackhart’s research found that more experienced instructors tend to have lower ratings than teachers with less experience. Her research also found that instructors who gave out better and easier grades tended to receive better rating no matter how effective their teaching methods were.

Dr. Blackhart believes while student evaluations are helpful and do give students a chance to speak their minds, they should not be the only source of instructor evaluation.

Some instructors at ETSU offer incentives for students to fill out SAIs for their classes. While their intentions may be good, this could sway students answers and opinions on the surveys. Incentivizing the SAIs may seem like a good way to get students more involved, but it may not be ethical.

Phillip Lusby, a sophomore at ETSU, believes the SAIs may not be useful or beneficial to instructors or administration. “I think [the SAIs] are a waste of time. If students don’t like a teacher’s methods, they will tell them that,” said Lusby.

What does this all mean? While it is still unknown whether ETSU’s administration is deciding on whether to keep or do away with the SAIs, it is clear that students, instructors and administrators have strong opinions on them. So where do you stand on the state of the SAIs?