

Faculty Evaluations As Beauty Contests

Many postsecondary institutions have had experience with student evaluations of their faculty. In some cases, institutions use student evaluations as a factor in their personnel decisions. A recently published study by Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman, and Misso (or RJSM) may interest those involved in student evaluations of faculty, given the following points (among others):

1. “Results indicated that professors perceived as attractive received higher student evaluations than did nonattractive controls that were matched for both department and gender. In real numbers, professors perceived as attractive, scored about 0.8 of a point higher on a 5-point scale...a practically meaningful result because professors perceived as attractive move from slightly higher than average on a 5-point scale (i.e., an okay professor) to above average ratings (a good professor)...often the difference on such important decisions for professors as promotion, tenure, and salary increases...” [p.30]
2. “...results from this study...were consistent across four separate universities...our overall results are consistent with a recent experimental investigation...” [p.31]
3. “Ratings for professors rated as nonattractive ranged from very low to extremely high...However, ratings for professors perceived as attractive rarely dropped below an average score (only 6 out of 211...)...” [p.31]
4. “In this study, we used student evaluations of professors from the Web site www.ratemyprofessors.com. We obtained evaluations on June 1, 2004, using the four schools with the most ratings...156 professors (50 women, 32%) from Grand Valley State University, 90 professors (48 women, 53%) from the University of Delaware, 106 professors (32 women, 30%) from San Diego State University, and 48 professors (14 women, 29%) from James Madison University...” [pp.23-24]

RJSM show that students may judge their instructors on what many people would consider as extraneous to the learning process. Consequently, this study may interest faculty, educational administrators, students, and researchers. In particular, researchers may want to investigate whether faculty physical attractiveness really is extraneous to the learning process (as many people might readily assume). That is, does the instructor’s physical attractiveness improve or reduce student learning in any way, directly or indirectly? And, if attractiveness truly is an extraneous variable, how may evaluations eliminate its confounding effect on faculty ratings?

Because the methodology and literature review for this study may interest various parties, they may wish to follow up on the study’s details. Todd C. Riniolo, Katherine C. Johnson, Tracy R. Sherman, and Julie A. Misso (all of Department of Psychology, Medaille College in Buffalo, N.Y.) document their study in an article (“Hot or Not: Do Professors Perceived as Physically Attractive Receive Higher Student Evaluations?”) in the publication *The Journal of General Psychology* (the January 2006 issue or Vol.133, pp. 19-35).