

# Why We Should Abolish Teaching Evaluations

William C. Dowling

Monica Devanas (letter to the Editor, Dec 1) seems to me to have missed the point of Mark Zipkin's excellent column on teaching evaluation forms.

The usual objection to student evaluations is that they put pressure on faculty to do the popular thing rather than the right thing in the classroom.

That is a reasonable objection. Anyone of my generation, educated before there were student evaluations, will remember one or two professors who changed our lives. Most often, they weren't "popular." They were the ones who pushed us, drove us, demanded more of us than we thought we had to give.

In the age of teaching evaluation as an end-of-term popularity contest, that kind of teaching has all but disappeared. The results, such as dumbed-down instruction and runaway grade inflation, are visible everywhere in American higher education.

But Mark Zipkin's column gets at a still deeper problem about teaching evaluations. We live in an advertising-saturated society in which young people are invited to imagine everything in their lives in terms of a "consumer model": you pay your money, the university provides the product.

Every year, I see more and more students who arrive at Rutgers unconsciously thinking of education as a sort of product, like buying a car or a TV set, or a service, like going to the dentist. You have a cavity, you sit back in the chair, and the dentist performs a procedure on you. In return, you pay the bill.

The worst thing about the consumer model is that it makes both genuine teaching and genuine learning impossible. Students who come to class with the idea that learning is something that "happens" to them in return for paying tuition, in the same way as a patient has a cavity fixed by the dentist, have a mindset that literally makes learning impossible.

In reality, learning philosophy or physics or Greek is an *activity* (a process of inward development). It's much more like training for a marathon or learning to play the violin than buying a Chevrolet or going to the dentist. It's something you can only do yourself, with the guidance of the teacher and within the framework of the curriculum. It is, above all, not something you can buy.

If the consumer model really is coming to dominate American higher education -- and it is, increasingly so -- then everything done to strengthen the idea of education as a product or a service is destructive to real teaching and learning. That's the problem with teaching evaluations as "customer satisfaction surveys."

In my office, I have a folder that contains two items: (1) a copy of the Rutgers Student Instructional Rating Survey, and (2) a Customer Satisfaction form I once took away from a Holiday Inn. Making due allowances for the difference in goods

and services provided, they are the same form, produced by the same logic of market forces and consumer relations.

I'm not saying that the people who circulate teacher evaluation forms are trying consciously to undermine genuine teaching or learning. Mostly, they simply haven't thought about the implications of what they're doing. Nor am I saying that it's just inside university administrations that the "consumer model" is doing its damage.

At the national level, for instance, the much-touted newsmagazine ratings of colleges are really consumer reports, encouraging students and parents to look at higher education on just the same terms as they think about buying a new automobile or refrigerator. I recently saw a magazine promotion that said "Unsure about which car to buy? Which college to choose for your child? See our latest rankings."

At Rutgers, students rose up last spring against the Lawrence administration's sale of the Rutgers name to the Coca Cola corporation. But their deeper objection, an admirable one, was to the further takeover of Rutgers by the consumer model.

I'm sure that Monica A. Devanas is acting in good faith. If she thought of the Student Instructional Rating Survey as what it is, a customer satisfaction form, she probably wouldn't continue to promote it. If she thought of classroom visitations and teaching portfolios as nothing more than public relations machinery meant to show the consumers that "we care about teaching" or "we do it your way," she'd probably be less proud of being someone who supervises the process.

Nonetheless, there are signs that a revolt against the commodification of every aspect of human life is underway in American society. If the revolt is successful, we may see a day when public relations operations like the ["Teaching Excellence Center"](#) are shut down, and when meaningful teaching and learning once again move to the center of American higher education.

William C. Dowling, Professor of English, teaches regularly in the Rutgers General Honors Program.

Reprinted from *The Daily Targum*, Dec 3, 2000.