Help! My Evaluations Are Lower than I Think They Should Be

Do you ever have a feeling that your students, male ones in particular, are rating you lower than they rate your male colleagues? You may be right. Susan Basow, who coordinates the Women’s Studies Program at Latyfayette College in Pennsylvania, has surveyed research on gender bias in teaching evaluations. She cites studies demonstrating that male undergraduates rate male professors more effective than identically described female professors; and that, for women faculty, to receive high evaluations, they have to demonstrate more effort (through more time spent with students and preparing for class), more teacher-student interactions in class (through class discussions and cooperative learning), as well as fewer demands (through reduced workload expectations and higher grades) than their male counterparts.

Continued on page 2
Basow's own research yields a consistent pattern: "male students rated female professors more negatively than they rated male professors on all six measures of the student rating questionnaire."

So What Can You DO? Try Susan Basow's

Strategies

Many of the factors that contribute to negative ratings of women faculty appear to be beyond our control. Certainly, students come to college with gender-role expectations that are difficult to modify. Society as a whole needs changing. But the women faculty member can do several things to arm herself against unfairly negative student evaluations. Some of these suggestions (especially #1 and #2 below) may not fit an individual woman's personality or ideology. Indeed, it's not fair that women professors have to be concerned about gender-stereotyped expectations. However, because those expectations do exist, it might be helpful for those who want to build an academic career to know how to try to get around them.

1. Educate others about the ways gender can affect student evaluations. If done early enough, especially with students and supervisors, such material is less likely to be seen as defensive. Many are able to learn of and overcome their own potential biases if they are made aware of them.

2. Women faculty must signal that they are competent and knowledgeable. For example, you might talk about your qualifications on the first day of class—anything associated with status, knowledge, competence, and expectations.

a. Dressing in a professional way appears more important for women faculty than for men. A woman professor who dresses informally (e.g., jeans) may seem more approachable, but she does not get high ratings for respect or knowledge (Lukavsky, Butler, & Harden, 1995).

b. Women faculty also may gain respect by using their title (Dr. or Professor) and last names, rather than their first names. Because women frequently are thought of as belonging to the domestic sphere, using professional titles may help students break the gender-stereotype set.

3. Women faculty must appear nurturant and expressive, but not too much so. These traits must go along with competent behaviors or else the woman risks being seen as a "mother" and similarly devalued. For example, along with telling students your qualifications on the first day of class, you might also inform them of your willingness to help students and some ways in which you do so; for example, review sessions, help with papers.

a. Smiling and eye contact appear to be particularly important for women faculty, especially with male students (Kierstead et al., 1988; Martin, 1984). These signs may make a competent woman less threatening.

b. It is also important to be accessible to students (e.g., post and keep regular office hours). Do not, however, be endlessly available to your students. You will not get any other work done, and you will not be particularly appreciated or rewarded with high evaluations (Bernstein, Sumner, et
Susan Basow’s Strategies (continued)

4. Teach female students. Female students tend to give higher ratings than male students overall, especially to female professors.

5. Avoid too much lecturing. Women who use the lecture format are rated lower than men who do so. Encouraging active participation by students is a good predictor of student evaluations, especially for women professors (Bernstein, Blaisdell, et al., 1995).

6. Try to get your institution to adopt standardized and objective assessment instruments, especially those that tap different teaching factors. Beware of forms that emphasize only some aspects of teaching, or that ask only vague general questions.

7. If your institution doesn't have a good evaluation form, you might be able to substitute or supplement with your own. Try to get students to focus on behaviorally based questions that relate to your course objectives rather than on subjective, vague ones.

8. Before handing out evaluations, review the course objectives and ask students to consider what they've learned during the term. This may help to focus students on your effectiveness as a professor rather than on your personality.

9. Ask peers to observe your classes and evaluate your teaching using behavioral rating forms. Although peers may be as vulnerable to bias as students, they may also provide a different, more objective view.

10. Document the student learning in your classes using a portfolio approach. If you teach one section of a multisection course that has a common final exam, document how well your students did relative to those in other sections. Include your grade distributions in your personnel file because women faculty may be penalized more than male faculty for being tough graders.

11. If you think the variables discussed in this chapter have affected your student ratings, include some of the research cited here in your personnel file or tenure packet. Encourage your Chair to read some relevant literature before writing the recommendation to the tenure and promotion committee.

Feminists in the University
Long Term Strategies

I have you noticed that, just as we feminists have been making our way in the academy with our inter-disciplinary thinking, commitment to diversity, and quest for a pedagogy combining head and heart, the academy has begun to "corporatize" itself until it is less and less welcoming to us and our ideas? Writing to the womandisc@aau.org list serve, Sara Lennox, who is President of the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages, notes disturbing new trends discussed at a teleconference on Women in the Academy broadcast from the University of Minnesota in April:

- PRIVATIZATION OF STUDENT FACILITIES
- DEFINITION OF 'SERVICE' TO MEAN 'OUTREACH,' DEFINED AS GRANT-GETTING
- THREATS TO TENURE
- DISTANCE LEARNING

To which Annette Kolodny, querying "Can Feminism Survive in the Academy of the 21st Century?" adds the shrinkage of the "once-robust liberal arts...both in terms of numbers of courses offered and in terms of full-time faculty numbers." 1 This is not a coincidence: we progressive feminists have been making serious inroads in academic ranks since the 1970s, and if we had continued to advance in a normal way, we would have been poised on the brink of representing a critical mass of tenured women. And therein lies the rub: the numbers of women tenured have diminished just as the numbers of women competent for tenuring have grown.

Lynn H. Collins writes about how competition theory has discovered that "as the number of female employees increased, the supportiveness of male employees toward female employees decreased," to the extent that "there may be increased resistance to the promotion of women until their average representation reaches or exceeds the 40% mark across universities." 2

In this newsletter we try to help women faculty rise to that critical mass by suggesting practical strategies: let's broaden our vision for a moment and consider some of Kolodny's Challenges for Change:

- "Organize and Analyze: invent boldly innovative arguments for liberal arts education.
- Reach out to re-forge a female solidarity with women students, staff, administrators, community women, and even women uncomfortable with the label "feminist."
- Overcome our distrust of authority: chart career paths for ourselves and prepare our graduate students for the department chair's office, the dean's office, the provost's office, and the presidency.
- Finally: it little serves us to analyze texts and interpret hegemonic cultural formations if we will not also put those strategies to work in transforming the policies and power arrangements of the institutions that employ us."

---


NSA TO MEET AT SIMMONS COLLEGE IN BOSTON ON JUNE 14-18
"2000 subversions: Women's Studies and the 21st Century"

Have you gotten charged up from our Strategies in this newsletter? It's even more heartening to come together in person to discuss ways we women can advance in academe.

THE ACADEMIC DISCRIMINATION ADVISORY BOARD WILL BE SPONSORING TWO SESSIONS:

Enacting Feminism in the Academy - a Fishbowl of Current Issues.

To enact feminism in the university, we will discuss
• how graduate students in Women's Studies can get started in the field
• strategies for feminist faculty in gaining tenure with a focus on disciplines that present special obstacles
• the need for part-time feminist faculty to organize
• ways to maintain feminist politics without selling out  
  
Facilitator: Sharon Leder

Our Mistakes, Our Successes: Senior Faculty Share Academic Experience and Advice.

In this session, women's studies faculty with more experience will share their stories of success and mistakes. Senior faculty have also called attention to the fact that they have not reached the end of their path yet. They too continuously face new situations and need help. Facilitator: Ines Shaw

For conference information email Loretta Younger, National Executive, nwsa@umail.umd.edu
WEBS FOR SISTERHOOD

Mail Strategies, tips and tactics to AVPratt@aol.org, but remember - nothing about your job on a university-owned computer!

Voices from the Gaps: This is a worldwide interactive web project focusing on the lives of women of color in the US and Canada. Meant as a curricular project for college or high school levels, you can participate in a discussion room and study women writers of color whose home pages are included. Web is http://voices.clia.umn.edu/, or join the Listserv: majordomo@atlas.socsci.umn.edu

NAWE: Advancing Women in Higher Education, has produced three resources for Initiatives on Access, Diversity, and Leadership in Higher Education. For more information: kdantley@nawe.org. Write to NAWE-Compendia, 1325 18th St., NW, Ste. 210 Washington, DC 20036-6511

TO JOIN US AND RECEIVE THE STRATEGIST:

Name: ........................................
Address: ......................................

$5 untenured
$10 tenured
Mail to Annis Pratt
1056 Larchlea Drive
Birmingham, MI 48009
Please Renew if it's been a year!
You may order Back Issues with the Following Topics by Sending a Stamped Self-Addressed #10 Envelope to the address above.
Circle dot by your choice(s)

- What to do about backlash when women faculty complain about sexist behavior
- Help! Male students in my class are acting up!
- How to get published - books.
- New on job? Lie low!
- How to get published - articles.
- Asked to direct? Don't!
- You need a mentor!
- Negotiating your salary.
- Got an Interview?
- Faculty moms.
- As an African American Faculty member I can't find time to get my job done.
- I Got the Job - Why am I so anxious?
- Work smart, not hard: Assessing your service commitments.