

# Evaluating the Student Rating of Teaching

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Kaylie Sirovy explains the significance and impact of the Student Rating of Teaching (SRT) at the University of Minnesota by highlighting differing opinions on its effectiveness and the transition from paper to online surveys.

**KAYLIE SIROVY:** Hi everyone, my name is Kaylie Sirovy, your host from the Minnesota Daily. Right now you're listening to In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

If you are a college student anywhere in this country you probably have heard of the SRTs, that is the Student Rating of Teaching or some form of it. It comes around at the end of every semester where students are asked to give anonymous feedback on the instructor and the class itself. Even though I've completed many of them myself, that's where my knowledge ends.

So, past hitting the submit button, I don't think about the SRTs anymore until the next time I have to write another one. As students, we aren't told much about them, just that they are something we are required to do and that they are important. While I didn't think they were a big deal, they kind of are according to Ole Gram, the Associate Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs at the University.

**OLE GRAM:** The SRT is really valuable. It's not an instrument for judging the faculty members' content knowledge, right? Whether they know chemistry or not. It really is about the student experience, and that's why it's important.

**SIROVY:** According to Gram, the SRT is just one of the methods for evaluating teaching, however, it is the only way to get feedback about the student experience specifically. You know, what worked for students, what should the instructor be doing differently and the like.

**GRAM:** There's sort of two portions to it, right? There is the instructor items, and then there are course items, right? We'll say the instructor presented the material clearly, right? It's about the clarity of instruction.

There are also items that asks about the course. Those are very broad. One is, "I would recommend this instructor to another student," right? Overall, "How did you feel about this instructor on a scale of one to five?" There's one that mirrors it that says, "Would you recommend this course to another student?"

And what we see is that those two actually differ a little bit. In general, students are much kinder to the instructor and they sometimes may say, look, “I really don’t like organic chemistry.” “I don’t think I want anyone to take that,” but the instructor did their best, right?

**SIROVY:** At the end, there are two sets of data due to Minnesota regulations. Instructor-related items are classified as personnel data under the Minnesota Data Practices Act and cannot be shared with students. Only people with higher authority can access this information, like department heads. However, students will never see what’s said on this section.

On the other hand, course-related data, which still provides a lot of information about a course, is accessible. Although it may not pertain to the specific instructor currently teaching the course, it generally reflects similar teaching experiences. This data includes information such as workload and effort required, which students can view when registering through the MyU portal.

Before researching for this episode, I didn’t realize that students had access to this kind of information. I always assumed it was classified, but I reviewed the gathered data and was surprised when I saw every course available at the University on the list. It includes course data dating back to fall 2020, with each course rated on a scale of 1 to 6, where 6 is the highest. While I found several courses with perfect scores, these often had only a few responses, which may not be very reliable. Despite this, I still found the data quite helpful.

**GRAM:** And the idea was that we need to find a way to get some of this information to the students right, to inform. It’s not, like Rate My Professor, which is sort of like, a little bit popularity contest. It is really saying, okay, these are students. They’re taking it very seriously. They know that this affects their instructors. So I think it’s better data in many ways, and we just hope that it’s useful for the students when they make decisions about which courses to take.

**SIROVY:** While Gram is an advocate for the SRT, others might not be so enthused about the end of semester survey. One person a little bit less optimistic about them is Judy Grandbois, the Executive Administrative Specialist for the Philosophy department. She works with the undergraduate students there and in the past, has handed these evaluations out and collected them. She said that since the University switched to online surveys instead of paper, it’s now doing a disservice to the instructors.

**JUDY GRANDBOIS:** I think in past years it was better when it was actually papers being handed out because the instructors would leave time during the class to fill them out. Now with the computerized ones, I just feel like there’s so many students that ignore emails. So I think that this is kind of doing a disservice to the instructors. Just because I don’t think the percentage of returned ones is the same as they’ve been in the past.

**SIROVY:** They switched to online because of the COVID pandemic and never switched back.

**GRAM:** We kept paper forms much longer than many other universities. The reason is that the response rate, so the number of students who actually completed the form, was much, much higher when we had paper forms. So, the process was at the end of the class, or sometimes during the class period, the faculty member would leave, you'd set aside 10-15 minutes, and it was a captive audience, right?

It's really hard in the era of social media and everything else that's going on for students to remember to complete that online. That's why we have sort of over the past four years, really, is that we encourage faculty to emulate the paper form, but electronically.

So we tell them, "Do what you would have done with the paper form." Most students in your class will have their phone with them, maybe a laptop, maybe a tablet, but it's so ubiquitous now with the smartphones that you can actually do that. So, leave the room for 10-15 minutes, assign someone to come get you afterwards, and you will get those higher response rates. We're still not there yet. That is the effective way.

So, a couple of things: faculty asking, telling students that they value their input, how they use it, how they have improved their teaching in the past based on that input and doing it during the class time.

Those are the big takeaway messages, and that is something that we really hope to improve. There is a point when we were hoping, are there other ways we can improve that, and we're going to keep experimenting with this. Do a little bit more of a campaign in the fall to encourage instructors to be more thoughtful about some of those tips because it's in their best interest as well.

**SIROVY:** It may be in their best interest, but it differs from department to department. Grandbois said that there's only a small number of philosophy instructors that actually read them.

**GRANDBOIS:** Nothing's ever in their favor based on what they say, because in past years, when students were kind of icky about it, you know, "well, it would be nice if the instructor showed up on time" or, you know, and so there were actual written responses like that.

Did that change how the instructors did it? No. Does it affect their pay? No. I don't really see the benefit of them because instructors have their syllabi. They teach the way they teach. Based on what a student or students say I don't think they're changing that.

**SIROVY:** There have been helpful comments and there still will be, according to Grandbois, but as the classroom size goes up, it's harder to read what each and every student said, especially on a computer screen. I can understand that since we as students do most of our

homework on our computers and let me tell you, after a few hours, it gets really hard on the eyes. What do students think of them?

**GRANDBOIS:** I don't really think, I've never heard anyone say "I love them." I just, you know, I've never heard that it almost seems like it's more of a chore for them, but that's philosophy.

I definitely wouldn't get rid of them, but I just think they're doing a disservice by making them electronic. I mean, I know we're all moving away from paper anything, but I just think there was a better number better, um, outcome from that, but we're not going to go back in time.

Cause I think they are a useful, helpful tool if they go back to the way they were. I don't really think they're useful or helpful the way they are because as you said, looking on the computer, reading through it. Who has that kind of time?

**SIROVY:** It varies if the professor goes through every one for a class, but the chairs and heads of departments always do. So what you say on the SRT does matter. You might not see the changes yourself, although the next class they teach probably will.

**GRAM:** Let's say they get a lower score than they would have liked to see on one of the items. Say the instructor provided feedback about, provided good feedback about my work. If that is low, the Center for Educational Innovation, that is professionals who help instructors improve their teaching.

They will sit down with them and do consultations about what they could improve. What can you do to provide better feedback? When you hear that students feel, "uh, I'm not really, I don't know where I'm in this class." Well, it probably means that there is some pedagogical techniques that you can implement to really raise that score.

**SIROVY:** With the thousands of surveys they get each year, they'll find some students who are frustrated and leave comments that are a bit obnoxious or not really relevant according to Gram. But sometimes, we have to remember that these professors are people too and have their flaws like anyone.

**GRAM:** That can be a source of frustration. I think we all know that feeling of you're being told everything's great about doing something and then there's that one person who criticizes you and all you can think of is that one person who criticized you. So we always tell people to really look at these in, in context, right?

If you get maybe half of the class is providing some comments. What is a theme? Is there a theme? And does it match some of what the responses were on the numerical items? That probably tells you something. And then, if they're those outliers, well, not clear how useful they are. By the way, it's not just negative comments, right?

So, you may get comments like, “best teacher ever.” It’s like, okay, well, I feel good, right? Tap yourself on the back. The problem with that is it’s not particularly helpful, right? Because you don’t know what it was that worked. So providing that concrete feedback is super helpful for any instructor. I guarantee you.

**SIROVY:** So it seems the SRTs are a two way street. Both students and professors have to be open to giving and receiving feedback to better the college experience. But Gram said that he doesn’t think they will change much in the future. They’ve been refined over the years, and have to be reviewed every four years by bringing it to the Senate Committee on Educational Policy—which includes student representatives—to discuss what works and what doesn’t.

Faculty and Academic Affairs will continue to gather feedback from the campus community to identify opportunities for improvement. Additionally, Gram said that instructors should consider at the beginning or in the middle of the semester surveys to help faculty gauge what’s working in their classrooms, separate from the end of semester evaluations shared with department chairs.

**GRAM:** So you could imagine having something like an SRT, essentially surveys, earlier in the term. So this is something we actually encourage faculty and instructors to do. To do something midterm or maybe three weeks into the semester, ask students informally, not anonymously, what is working. What should I be doing differently? And then going back to the class and say, “okay, I heard from you that we did not spend enough time on this topic. It’s still muddy. I’m going to spend another class session reviewing it.” No one is reviewing the instructor. It’s just for the instructor.

**SIROVY:** For my fellow students listening right now, the SRTs may seem unimportant and like a chore, and I’ve felt this way too, but people do listen to what we have to say. Now I can’t say this for every department and every instructor, your thoughts about a class do not go ignored. It just depends on the professor. Some care very much about what a student says, and others maybe don’t.

**GRAM:** SRTs are, you know, a little bit of anxiety and it’s not a perfect instrument. It is just part of feedback. And the way we think of it is that this is about as the student voice. It’s not about students evaluating the content and all that, or how brilliant the faculty member is. It’s really about the experience in the classroom over that time. And it’s one point of feedback on teaching. And I think that’s important to keep in mind.

**SIROVY:** This episode was written and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening in, and I personally would love to hear what other students think about the SRTs, so send us an email to [podcasting@mndaily.com](mailto:podcasting@mndaily.com) with comments, questions or concerns. I’m Kaylie, and this has been In The Know.

