

Student Perceptions and Experiences When Evaluating College Professors



Tennessee Technological University

Abstract

In this interpretive case study, I interviewed four students majoring in secondary science education at Yellowstone University in order to understand how students make sense of the IDEA Faculty Evaluation process. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants and I conducted interviews, recorded field notes, and engaged in peer evaluation as a means of collecting data. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis in which transcribed interviews were coded in order to identify recurring themes and patterns.

Keywords: Student Perceptions, Faculty Evaluations, Students evaluating teachers/professors

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem

The merits of student evaluations of teaching (SET), where students evaluate their instructors at the conclusion of a course, have been debated for decades. Studies show conclusive and comprehensive findings: bias and stereotypes in performance evaluations, whether preconceived or developed, have an immense impact on the tenure track, salary potential, and level of retention/promotion of professors (Addison, Best, & Warrington, 2006; Al-Issa, & Sulieman, 2007; Basow, 1995; Beyers, 2008; Campbell, Gerdes, Holley, & Steiner, 2006; Culver, 2010; Deborah, 2008; Lawson, & Stephenson, 2005; Thornton, Adams, & Sepehri, 2010; Whitworth, Price, & Randall, 2002). While biases are one side of the SET argument, the flipside has the potential to have a detrimental effect on instruction, too. Professors may engage in unproductive and ineffective teaching strategies in order to obtain higher evaluating scores (Crumbley, Henry, & Kratchman, 2001), because they “teach in fear” (Beyers, 2006, p. 102) of SET ratings. Either way, SETs are still commonly used as a method of evaluating instructors throughout the nation (Campbell, et al., 2006).

Based on a study by Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001), the mean response time for students to complete a faculty evaluation form was 2.56 minutes. At Yellowstone University, the pseudonym I will assign the cooperating university, the Instructional Development and Effectiveness Assessment (IDEA) is used to evaluate faculty. This evaluation form consists of 47 questions that are answered by using a 5-point rating scale (1 = definitely false, 2 = more false than true, 3 = in between, 4 = more true than false, and 5 = definitely true) and a free-response comments section; additionally, the faculty member can choose to add up to 20 more questions the students would respond to in the same manner. In other words, students would be answering questions at a rate of 3.26 seconds per item, not including the free-response comments section

and the potential 20 additional questions. Are students truly aware of the magnitude of those 2.56 minutes, and do they realize the potential significance of their responses on the professor's career and personal life?

As the call for accountability of instructors increases, the argument regarding the validity of using SETs as a primary method for evaluating instructor performance will continue to reign. The purpose of this study was to understand how students perceive the faculty evaluation system at the university level and how their experiences shape their responses during this process. The study will also look at how those responses differ depending on the student's experiences in courses in the science and education departments at Yellowstone University. In order to understand how effective SETs are at Yellowstone University, I will examine the experiences of students that have gone through the motions of evaluating their professors.

The first chapter of my research proposal will set the premise of my case study, outlining background information on SETs, the purpose of my study, problem statement, research statement, and research questions. Chapter two, my review of literature, will dive into the current literature and research regarding SETs. This chapter will discuss how students perceive SETs in other universities and countries, which characteristics and qualities students believe instructors should possess, and how a multitude of instructor and course factors have shown to influence student responses. The factors I will elaborate on in this section include grades, gender, class size, class level (undergraduate vs. graduate), use of humor, and perceived learning. Finally, chapter three of my proposal contains my methodology. This chapter discusses, in detail, the methods by which I will gather participants, conduct research, analyze data, maintain participant confidentiality, and adhere to codes of ethics. Early in this chapter I will discuss the theoretical perspective, or paradigm, my study and philosophies find themselves within. Sampling strategies

will be explained along with a statement of my own subjectivities regarding the topic of SETs. Chapter three concludes with the validity and trustworthiness section of my proposal, explaining my procedures for ensuring that my research study is credible.

Problem Statement

The student evaluation of teaching process affects many stakeholders; these major players include faculty members, administrators, and students. Little did I realize during my early undergraduate years of college that my efforts and objectivity, or lack thereof, evaluating my professors could have such a ripple effect throughout the lives of others and the university itself. I remember that until I changed majors and was a part of education and teaching myself, I was nonchalant at best in taking faculty evaluations seriously. Many of my peers conveyed similar indifference to applying critical thought, giving constructive feedback, or seriously considering the purpose when completing these forms at the end of each semester. This realization led me to understand my personal goals in this study, which were to increase my knowledge on SETs so that I may inform both students and also instructors on what I have learned. It is imperative that we understand the perceptions and attitudes of students when the results of these evaluations have the potential to produce steep penalties or substantial rewards for professors.

My study will examine the perceptions of students that have experienced the evaluation process. I aim to learn what experiences have led to both positive and also negative responses on evaluations forms. This insight could provide students and instructors with an opportunity to make the process of SETs potentially both more informed and successful in the future.

Research Statement

In this interpretive case study, I took field notes, engaged in peer evaluation, and interviewed four students majoring in secondary science education at Yellowstone University in order to understand how students make sense of the IDEA Faculty Evaluation process.

Research Questions

My experiences enrolling in classes throughout my undergraduate degree led me to believe that many students may be ignorant or uninformed of the purpose when completing the evaluation forms rating their professors at the end of each term. I learned what students know about the IDEA evaluation form and how they believe their responses influenced and shaped the careers of the instructors they have rated. This led me to my first research question that will guide my study:

1. What are students' understandings of the IDEA faculty evaluations completed at the end of their courses?

This question assisted me in understanding the perceptions of students throughout the process of faculty evaluation.

As a secondary education major with a concentration in chemistry myself, my next research question was derived:

2. How do students' different classroom experiences in the education and science departments influence their responses on the IDEA evaluations?

Often times interacting with other science and education majors I have heard comments from my peers suggesting the education curriculum is too easy, or that the science curriculum is too difficult. I was interested to learn about the experiences of four students majoring in secondary education with a concentration in science to see how their experiences across departments influenced their evaluation of professors.

My third and final research question is a result of the overwhelming amount of literature either supporting or refuting the validity of SETs. By that I mean many research studies have been conducted on the topic of SETs, and there are claims suggesting that instructor characteristics, teaching strategies, or student bias may have an influence on student responses. These claims led me to the following research question, which aims to understand the student experiences that produce to certain responses, ideals, or opinions regarding the IDEA evaluation process:

3. What student experiences influence and shape their responses on the IDEA evaluations?

These three research questions will guide the course of my study and are each crucial to understanding how students make sense of the IDEA evaluation process.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Students form lasting impressions in their first meeting with their professor, and these premature judgments last throughout the course (Laws, Apperson, Buchert, & Bregman, 2010); furthermore, these early judgments likely influence student responses when they evaluate their professors (Laws, et al., 2010, p. 90). So, are students' evaluations of their professors reliable and valid? Do students think their evaluations are effective and unbiased?

This study examined how students perceive the faculty evaluation system at the university level and how their experiences shaped their responses during this process. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are students' understandings of the IDEA faculty evaluations completed at the end of their courses?
- 2) How do students' different classroom experiences in the education and science departments influence their responses on the IDEA evaluations?
- 3) What student experiences influence and shape their responses on the IDEA evaluations?

The following review of literature is divided into three primary categories: *Student Perceptions on Effective College Teachers*, *Student Perceptions on/throughout the Process of SETs*, and *Biases and Other Factors that Influence SETs*. The first category was chosen because I felt before I could understand how students perceived evaluating their professors, I needed to understand what qualities and characteristics students looked for in instructors and what they perceived effective teaching looked like. The second category, *Student Perceptions on/throughout the Process of SETs*, aided me in understanding recent perceptions on SETs throughout universities across the nation. The third and final category, *Biases and Other Factors that Influence SETs*, is critical to understanding why students rated instructors the way they did.

These categories provided a framework for my study and are intended to organize the literature in a way that informs my purpose and to provide a guide throughout the process of answering the previously stated research questions. The third section is split into subsections and headings according to the following factors and potential areas of bias: *Grades*, *Gender*, *Class Size*, *Class Level (Undergraduate vs. Graduate)*, *Use of Humor*, and *Perceived Learning*. While there are many factors and potential biases that may influence SETs, the listed factors are those that I was able to reinforce by a multitude of studies I encountered throughout my research.

In order to answer these questions and conduct a worthwhile study, it was necessary to look at the current literature and research being conducted on the issues regarding students evaluating their teachers. The articles and dissertations used throughout this review of literature were found and retrieved from journal databases available through Tennessee Technological University's library. First, I used the library's search engine with key words and phrases, such as *student evaluation of teachers*, *student perceptions*, *teacher evaluations*, *factors*, *biases* and *characteristics* to compile a multitude of articles and dissertations that were relevant to my study. It was necessary for me to borrow an article and a book from other universities, specifically the University of Bath and University of Iowa respectively, using an interlibrary loan system. After I located all of the articles, I categorized each article according to the study and findings each provided; the topics and headings throughout this review of literature reflect this categorization strategy.

Student Perceptions on Effective College Teachers

In order to understand student perceptions when evaluating their teachers, I felt it was first necessary to understand the traits and characteristics that students perceived instructors must possess in order to be judged as an effective college teacher. When students enter the classroom,

their educational experiences up to that point also enter and shape their perceptions for the entire course (Dicks, Pruitt, & Tilley, 2010); the researchers suggested that “students with poor expectations for the instructors and the course may be less engaged and perform at a lower level than students with higher expectations” (p. 44). This means that students constructed a model, whether consciously or not, that described and illustrated the characteristics of what they perceive to be an effective teacher.

Khaled and Donald (2009) distributed questionnaires to 500 college students in the countries of the United States, Jordan, and Chile to discover which instructor traits students perceived to be important. The findings were similar to those of a another study conducted on 104 undergraduate students at a university in the Southwest and 147 undergraduate students at a university in the Midwest of the United States, which classified student satisfaction into three categories: (1) expertise in other subject areas, (2) variety of teaching methods, and (3) fostering of team work (Gruber, Lowrie, Brodowsky, Reppel, Voss, & Chowdhury, 2012). In the first study, by Khaled and Donald (2009), they found thirty-four traits students rated between important and very important, and these traits were categorized into five domains: (1) personality, (2) communication skills, (3) style of class management and student evaluation, (4) qualification and credential, and (5) teaching style (p. 125). What I can derive from these two studies is that students demand professors who are experts in their field, are “well-read” in other fields, use a variety of methods and teaching styles, consistently engages and stimulates students, maintains strong communication skills, and provides valid and fair (as perceived by the student) methods of assessment.

In an in-depth, multistate mixed-methods analysis of a teaching evaluation form (TEF) submitted to 912 undergraduate and graduate students, each participant submitted at least three

characteristics they believed effective instructors demonstrate, with a total 2,991 statements received (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). The researchers classified participant responses into nine themes: *student centered*, *expert*, *professional*, *enthusiast*, *transmitter*, *connector*, *director*, *ethical*, and *responsive*. The researchers defined each theme; for example, *transmitter* meant “clearly conveys course material” (p. 131) and *director* meant “expert in his/her field” (p. 131). A detailed description of each theme also was provided. Most of the findings were parallel to those of Khaled and Donald (2009) and Gruber, et al. (2012); however I wanted to surface the two themes these other studies did not address: *responsive* (meaning provides frequent, timely, and meaningful feedback) and *student centered* (places students in the center of the learning process) (p. 132). Both of these criteria were rated very important by students (Khaled and Donald, 2009), and as a current high school teacher and graduate student myself, I would have to agree. Al-Issa and Sulieman (2007) said that building relationships with students had an impact on evaluation scores. In order to build positive, productive relationships with students, professors must possess the traits that students feel are important.

Student Perceptions on/throughout the Process of SETs

After I looked at the characteristics students perceived construct a good college instructor, I decided to unfold the literature regarding how students make sense of the student evaluation process of professors. What was interesting when reviewing the literature was the variety of findings regarding student perceptions on the level of seriousness faculty and other students had while administering and completing SETs. Brown (2008) found students were indifferent to whether faculty and students took SETs seriously. Al-Issa and Sulieman (2007) found that 34 % agreed, 30 % disagreed, and 36 % were unsure if students took SETs seriously. Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001) discussed that students will not take SETs seriously if

they believe the faculty does not take them seriously. After studying these findings, it was quite ironic to learn that the majority of students in a multitude of studies indicated they believed SETs were important and necessary. During a study conducted by Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001), where 819 students were selected at the American University of Sharjah, located in the United Arab Emirates, findings indicated 81.1 % of participants agreed SETs were important and 82.6 % agreed that teacher performance should use the feedback to improve on teaching Al-Issa and Sulieman (2007) had similar findings, with 79 % of students believing the University of Sharjah (AUS) should continue to evaluate their teachers and 68 % of the participants agreeing that by evaluating their teachers they are helping them improve their teaching. Additionally, the findings of studies by both of Surratt and Desselle (2007) and also Kwack (1994) supported these findings.

A study of 51,194 student at a large Midwestern education institution in the United States found that rewards, social pressures, and potential to change were all motivations for students to complete evaluations of their professors; however, many students were reluctant for a variety of reasons: outside influences, concern for anonymity, punishments, inappropriate timing accessibility, completion of multiple SETs, and ethics (Ernst, 2007). Research indicated most students were willing to complete observations when given the opportunity (Al-Abbadi, Alkhateeb, Khanfar, Mujtaba, & Latif, 2009), but based on the previously mentioned study, it is apparent faculty and institutions must be very sensitive and professional in the methods by which they administer these evaluations if students are expected to provide thoughtful, critical, and honest feedback.

Returning to the study by Ahmadi, Helms, and Rasizdeh (2001), the majority of students disagreed that a faculty member's salary was affected by the results of SETs; also, they

discovered most students did not know whether tenure track and professional advancement was affected by SETs, but 68.3 % of those students felt that they should be affected (p. 17). These same students also felt evaluations should be done every semester for every course (p. 19), which agreed with the findings of Brown (2008), where the majority of students, 67.5 %, felt once a semester was the correct SET admission frequency. Contradictory to that finding, though, in the same study Brown also found that if professors administered Mid-Semester Evaluations (MSEs), nearly nine out of every ten students believed the evaluations would increase the performance of both themselves and the instructors, as well as improve the overall attitude within the class. So, this study suggests that evaluating teachers more than once a semester might be okay, as long as the premise and purpose are clear.

The literature suggested that as students spend more time in universities, their feelings towards the process of evaluating their instructors become negative. Finding that senior students had the most negative perceptions on SETs, Al-Issa and Sulieman (2007) suggested this might be a result of students having to complete SETs repeatedly throughout the years.

Finally, on the topic of tenured staff vs. non-tenured staff, studies showed that generally students disapprove of differentiation between the two classifications in terms of evaluations. Surratt and Desselle (2007) discovered in a study questioning first, second, and third year pharmacy students, that most students disagreed that senior faculty should be evaluated less or not at all (p. 2). The findings of Al-Abbadi, Alkhateeb, Khanfar, Mujtaba, and Latif (2009) were similar in that students slightly disagreed that senior and junior faculty should be evaluated at different frequencies.

So far, a few general statements can be derived from the literature discussed so far. First, students generally believed evaluating their instructors was important. Second, many different

factors motivated students to complete SETs; however, many factors dissuaded students. Instructors, administrators, and facilitators of SETs realize the magnitude and fragility throughout this process. Third, students often were unaware that SET results might affect the promotional status, tenure-track, and salaries of instructors, yet students felt the results should have an affect. Enlightening students on the impact of SETs to the professional lives of professions seems beneficial. Finally, students tended to feel strongly about every instructor, regardless of tenure track or professional rank, being on the same playing field in terms of frequency and implications of SETs.

Biases and Other Factors that Influence SETs

One of the two major concerns regarding the use of SETs is student bias when completing these evaluation forms (Campbell, et al., 2006). This section will address a multitude of factors and biases that influence student responses on the SETs. It is typical for college students to research the professors of a course prior to enrolling in a class via websites like ratemyprofessors.com (Lawson & Stephenson, 2005) or by word-of-mouth, to discover the easiness, grade distribution, attractiveness, and quality of professors as perceived by the students. A study completed by Crumbley, Henry, and Kratchman (2001) found that 36 % of their participants, which were 530 business and accounting majors at a large southwestern university, indicated that they checked prior grade distributions before choosing an instructor. These biases may translate to those first-day impressions students constructed and held throughout the semester, mentioned earlier in the literature review.

Grades

Perhaps one of the most controversial and studied factors that can influence student evaluation is grades; however, for the purposes of this study it is important to separate grades

into two categories: expected grade and grade earned. Addison, Best, and Warrington (2006) studied 157 students enrolled in a psychology-type class at Eastern Illinois University, and discovered that students who earned higher grades produced higher evaluation ratings; furthermore, the researchers discovered that if they controlled the grade earned, students would rate professors higher if their earned grade was higher than their expected grade, and conversely, they would rate professors lower if their earned grade was lower than their expected grade. Al-Issa and Sulieman (2007) reported that 32 % of their participants admitted that their evaluations were influenced by grades. The number one statement reported by students with respect to factors likely to lower grades was “not taught enough to make expected grade” (Crumbley, Henry, & Krachman, 2001, p. 203). Brown (2008) found that students believed that other students use SETs spitefully based on the grades they received in the class. Most of the research seemed to point to grades influencing the scores produced on SETs, particularly how expected grades relates to earned grades. If this is the case, I sense a possible cause for grade inflation at universities.

Gender

The findings related to gender throughout the process of SETs are definitely far from conclusive from study to study. We can think of gender in two realms: student gender and faculty gender. Whitworth, Price, and Randall (2002) analyzed 12,153 student faculty evaluations and found that female instructors tended to rate better than their male counterparts; however, this is contradictory to the findings of Bavishi, Madera, and Hebi (2010), which yielded results suggesting there were no effects due to gender. Female students tended to rate their instructors, regardless of their gender, higher than male students (Campbell, et al., 2006). According to Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001), the majority of students, 87.8 % and 86.7

% respectively, disagreed with rating faculty of the same gender and opposite gender negatively. Additionally, Al-Issa and Sulieman (2007) reported that 77 % of their respondents disagreed that gender influenced their evaluations. It would seem that the bias as a result of gender was subjective to the school itself, as a variety of results were present.

Class Size

Class size is an interesting factor throughout the process of SETs, because like many other factors, it is out of the professor's control. Thornton, Adams, and Sepehri (2010) discovered that students tended to rate professors more highly in classes with fewer students during a study of 80 Student Instructor Reports (SIR) of full-time faculty teachers in the College of Business of a small southeastern university. Addison, Best, and Warrington (2006) also found that class size influenced student responses on SETs. This might be due to the lack of students being able to develop relationships with professors, which was an important quality discussed earlier.

Class Level (Undergraduate vs. Graduate)

I was surprised to see multiple studies addressing the topic of class level, specifically undergraduate and graduate, having such an influence on student ratings of their professors. Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001) discovered that freshmen and graduate students typically had the most positive attitudes about SETs

Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001) offered the following explanation:

It is possible that the attitudes of senior students were influenced by the fact they had been required to complete SET forms for a number of years, whereas graduate students and freshman (many of whom were in their first or second semesters in the university) had probably never evaluated a teacher before; for

these students, the “novel” task of evaluation might therefore have been viewed more positively.” (p. 19)

Whitworth, Price, and Randall (2002) had similar findings, which displayed that graduate students tended to rate their instructors more highly than undergraduate students; however the results of a study conducted by Kwack (1994) contradicted these findings, where the opposite proved true and undergraduates had more positive perceptions on SETs. Even though the studies were not conclusive, each study found a difference in the academic level of the student (graduate vs. undergraduate). In terms of SETs, it can be said that this did play a role in this process.

Use of Humor

Recent literature is displaying conclusively that students tend to rate professors that use humor in their classes higher on evaluations. Slocombe, Miller, and Hite (2011) surveyed 163 students at a Midwestern AACSB accredited school of business in order to learn student perspectives on SETs, and students indicated higher scores for professors who used humor (p. 55). Similarly, in the study executed by Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001), 63.1 % of students said they give higher evaluations to professors with a good sense of humor (p. 16). Genga, Makewa, and Role (2011) studied 311 students—159 male and 151 female—at 6 secondary schools in Migori District, Kenya, and also found students rated their teachers as more effective if they used humor. The researchers students “are motivated, they find the lessons more engaging, their anxiety about the subjects is reduced; their thoughts and interests are stimulated when their relationship with the teacher is positive” (p. 14). Furthermore, Khaled and Donald (2009) found that students perceive humor as an important instructor trait. Humor appeared to be a powerful tool in the learning process and in producing more positive evaluation scores;

however, this knowledge might be unbeneficial to instructors since humor is not easily acquired (Slocombe, Miller, & Hite, 2011, p. 55).

Perceived Learning

Making sense of the ambiguous term, *perceived learning*, can be quite an endeavor, since it is subjective to each student. This factor often is referred to as *outcomes*. Thornton, Adams, and Sepehri (2010) found that the more students perceive they learn, the higher they tend to rate their instructors. Crumbley, Henry, and Kratchman (2001) had 82.5 % of respondents agree that perceived learning impacts their evaluation (p. 201). Culver (2010) and Campbell, Gerdes, Holley, and Steiner (2006) had similar findings in discovering that the amount of perceived learning was one of the most important facts in predicting SET scores (p. 363); additionally, the students Culver (2010) studied felt the more engaged they were, the more learning that took place, and the students indicated they were more likely to give higher scores on SETs. Of the studies I reviewed, the evidence was conclusive and consistent that the amount of learning students perceived they experienced had an immense influence on evaluation ratings.

While this review of literature is only a small piece of the vast puzzle encompassing student evaluations of teaching, much insight that can be gained. First, we must take into account that students walk into class with every educational experience they have lived through thus far; also, students walk in with a set of standards and expectations for their instructors. It is important instructors take the process of evaluation seriously if they expect their students to take them seriously, too. There are a plethora of characteristics students believe instructors must possess, and it is this construct the students create that inevitably produces the influences affecting SETs. Students feel they can effectively evaluate their instructors and that they are entitled to; furthermore, students feel the criticism and feedback they provide should be used to improve the

instructional strategies and techniques of the teacher. This review only covered a handful of the many factors and potential biases that seem to appear throughout the process of students evaluating their teachers, but the fact of the matter is, bias is present. Students appear to be evaluating their professors based on a number of preconceived notions and also those constructed throughout the semester. If we are to let SET scores influence the tenure track, promotional level, and salary potential of instructors at universities, we have to ensure we completely understand how students make sense of this process.

In their concluding statements, Crumbley, Henry, and Kratchman (2001) said,

The safest approach for an instructor is to lecture, be nice, grade easy, and cover little material... as a result, a significant number of professors engage in dysfunctional techniques (i.e. anti-learning) which causes continuous upward spiral in the average grades (e.g. a ratchet effect). (p. 205)

I have to agree that unless we address these issues, student evaluations may lead to inappropriate and unproductive teaching and grading strategies; after all we do not want instructors to teach in fear of their evaluations (Beyers, 2008, p. 102).

This information helps inform my research because it provides me with a premise of current student perceptions and biases that I may encounter during my interviews. I am hoping to contribute more evidence either supporting or refuting the perceptions and biases I have already discussed; furthermore I hope to contribute evidence that says whether or not the discipline of the course (science vs. education) has an effect on the students' perceptions that I will be interviewing. Any other factors I have not already discussed that reveal themselves during the interviews will also be discussed. I hope to understand how students make sense of the SET process and raise awareness on how exactly student perceptions influence their ratings.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this interpretive case study, I interviewed four students majoring in secondary science education at Yellowstone University in order to understand how students make sense of the IDEA Faculty Evaluation process. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants and I conducted interviews, recorded field notes, and engaged in peer evaluation as a means of collecting data. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis in which transcribed interviews were coded in order to identify recurring themes and patterns. Following the discussion of theoretical perspective, or paradigm, is an explanation of the methodology that best fits my research, which was the case study approach. Methodology, as defined by Glesne (2006) is “a theory of how inquiry should proceed; it involves analysis of assumptions, principles, and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry” (p. 14). The research setting and participants were described in depth, along with why I chose the purposeful sampling strategies of typical case sampling and criterion sampling for my study. I discussed a variety of methods I used to collect and analyze my data; furthermore, I used a descriptive subjectivity statement in order to explore my own position, subjectivity, and bias. I concluded this chapter by discussing the trustworthiness and validity of my study and the methods that were used to ensure that my study was credible.

Research Methods

Glesne (2006) defined research methods as “a procedure, tool, or technique used by the inquirer to generate and analyze data” (p. 14). As Maxwell (2012) stated, “you are the research instrument in a qualitative study, and your eyes and ears are the tools you use to gather information and to make sense of what is going on” (p. 88). The procedures, tools, and techniques that were used throughout the course of this research study are described in detail in

the following sections. The methods described in this chapter were intended to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' understandings of the IDEA faculty evaluations completed at the end of their courses?
2. How do students' different classroom experiences in the education and science departments influence their responses on the IDEA evaluations?
3. What student experiences influence and shape their responses on the IDEA evaluations?

Theoretical Perspective

The paradigm, or philosophical position, for my research was that of the interpretivist, which was further discussed in this section. A researcher should remain epistemologically aware, which refers to the position a researcher takes within their project, specifically with regard to the “knowledge, truth(s), epistemic conditions, and justifications” by which evidence is provided (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009, p. 687). To gain awareness, I researched and evaluated each type of paradigm to find the one that most aligned with my methods and methodology. According to Patton (as cited in Glesne 2006), interpretivists tend to purposefully select their case, and I fell into this category (p. 44). While the paradigm of a study should remain subjective to the researcher and their research, Maxwell (2012) believed it is necessary to identify with which philosophical position our ideals of reality and how we construct or obtain knowledge of that reality, or truth, aligns (p. 39). The world of an interpretivist is constructed according to the ideals of each knower and observer in that system, and the researcher aims to understand situations from the viewpoint of those experience that situation (Sipe & Constable, 1996, p. 158). My case study had strict boundaries, which were discussed in the following methodology section, and I aimed to learn from the experiences and

perceptions of the participants within that case study in order to answer questions specific to the case study I had chosen. When describing the theoretical perspectives of an interpretivist, Glesne (2006) suggested that the research goal is to interpret “the social world from the perspectives of those who are actors in that social world” (p. 8). My goal was to understand how students, the actors, made sense of the IDEA evaluation process, the social world, so interacting with my participants in order to learn their perceptions and experience was required. As Sipe and Constable (1996) said, interpretivists are about understanding a world where reality is subjective and constructed – communication is “cooperative, interactive, and humanistic” (p. 158). Since I used the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of others to make sense of a process that is subjective to the individual, classroom, and university, the traditions of the interpretivist were used as a framework throughout my research study.

Type of Study

According to Stake (as cited in Glesne, 2006), a case study is the process of conducting research that investigates a specific system that is contextually bounded and displays the integration of “working parts” (p. 22). Creswell (2007) defined a case as a “bounded system” (p. 73). The following boundaries described why my study in particular warrants this methodology: the university (Yellowstone University), the departments within the university (science and education), and the student participants’ field of study (secondary science education). More specifically, my participants were undergraduate college students majoring in secondary education with a concentration in science, such as chemistry, biology, or physics. The case study approach, or methodology, to research works well for this study since I wanted to understand student perceptions throughout the process of evaluating their professors; therefore, I used the

case study approach to guide me throughout the process of recruiting participants, collecting data, analyzing data, and disseminating the results of my study.

Setting and Participants

Throughout this research study four undergraduate level college students were interviewed. These volunteers participated in the IDEA evaluation process of evaluating their instructors and were secondary education majors, with a concentration in science, such as chemistry, biology, or physics. The participants were recruited from a cooperating university in the middle Tennessee area, which was assigned the pseudonym Yellowstone University for the purposes of this study. The city that the university was located in is relatively small in comparison with other cities in the U.S., with a population approximately 70,000 residents. Three of the four participants were Caucasian and the fourth was Native American. The participants were between 22 and 28 years in age. Each volunteer was a part of the secondary education upper-division program at Yellowstone University. All four had concentrations in science, with two of them focusing on Earth Science and the other two on Biology.

Sampling Strategies

Maxwell (2012) suggested that a case-study is a research approach where the researchers select a case and formulate questions to answer based on that case; furthermore, he went on to suggest that the case is purposefully selected. Using a case study methodology as a guide, my participants were purposely selected, which is also known as purposeful sampling. My participants were non-random volunteers who participated in the IDEA student evaluation of teaching protocols; furthermore, the characteristics of these participants adhered to the sampling strategies outlined throughout this section. When conducting qualitative research, seldom do researchers work with large numbers of participants to warrant random sampling (Glesne, 2006).

Since I only used four participants for the purpose of interviewing, I needed to engage in sampling strategies that procured individuals within the boundaries of my case study. As a result, purposeful sampling, more specifically, criterion sampling was used. Typical case sampling was used since I was looking for a typical student who had completed evaluations of their instructors (Patton, 2002). The criteria for my participants was limited to undergraduate college students majoring in secondary education with a concentration in science; as a result, I also used stratified sampling, since I recruited students within a specific major and concentration (Patton, 2002). Other factors however were less important to obtaining the goals of this study, such as the ethnicity, gender, age, and race of the students. As Glesne (2006) stated, “different sampling strategies allow you to learn different things about your topic because each strategy you choose leads you to particular kinds of sites and people” (p. 44). Using multiple sampling strategies enabled me to find participants who were rich in information yet maintained the necessary criteria as it related to my research goals and study.

I intended to recruit my participants first by inquiring personally in the science and education departments at Yellowstone University about volunteers who may be potentially interested in participating in my study. I was granted permission from a professor to recruit volunteers within their class one evening and was able to acquire four volunteers. Following the class meeting, I met briefly with the four volunteers to discuss my research, what their role in the process would be, the informed consent form (see Appendix A), and discuss time availabilities. The volunteers and myself exchanged email and phone correspondences to set up both interviews and also peer evaluation meetings following the transcription and data analysis.

Data collection

According to Maxwell (2012), using multiple methods of collecting information is common in qualitative research, and he said using multiple methods might result in different perspectives or aspects about the case being studied (p. 102). Since an interpretivist perspective in research requires interacting with people and learning their perceptions on a matter (Glesne, 2006), interviewing my participants was critical to gaining understanding of the individual experiences students went through when evaluating their professors and the perceptions they have on the IDEA process as a result of those experiences. As stated by Glesne (2006), “Qualitative researchers have an active role in producing the data they record through the questions they ask and the social interaction in which they take part” (p. 47). During these one-hour interviews, used an interview guide consisting of 32 questions (see Appendix B). As defined by Mathison (1988), triangulation is when a researcher uses multiple sources of data in order to increase validity and decrease bias. In addition to recording the interviews with an audio recording device, I took field notes on the body language and emotions shown by facial expressions of the participants as they responded to each question. Furthermore, I made observations of the setting and environment of the location the participants chose to be interviewed at to add to my field notes. Additionally, I used peer evaluations and member checks to ensure my interpretations of each volunteer’s words were correct. During this post-interview peer evaluation, I provided each volunteer with a copy of the interview transcript and data analysis on separate occasions, so that we could read through not only the transcription of the conversation we had, but also my interpretations of their responses together and validate the correctness of my data.

Data analysis

Maxwell (2012) said that any qualitative study requires decisions about how the analysis will be done, and these decisions should inform, and be informed by, the rest of the design (p. 104). I used thematic design as a means of analyzing my data. Thematic design, as defined by Glesne (2006) and Maxwell (2012), explores the use of data coding in order to find themes and patterns. As I listened to the interviews I wrote notes and memos on what I heard in order to “develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 105). I transcribed the interviews and looked for commonalities and differences among the experiences as described by the participants. I also observed how each participant’s body language changed throughout the interview in an attempt to understand which aspects of the process influence their emotions. Glesne (2006) suggested practicing constant case comparison results in different perspectives, questions, and relationships between cases. Maxwell informed researchers that “one of the most common problems in qualitative studies is letting your unanalyzed field notes and transcripts pile up, making the task of final analysis much more difficult and discouraging” (p. 104). In order to avoid this I began data analysis immediately after finishing the transcription of each interview.

Ethical issues

Maxwell (2012) believed that ethical concerns should be a part of every aspect of research design. Before interviewing, I conducted an in-depth explanation and discussion with each participant personally. The briefing explained the purpose of this research study and the participant’s role within the study. Also, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix A) to participate in the study. With informed consent comes awareness and empowerment within the position that the research participants stand (Glesne, 2006). I read the consent form to the participant and informed them that they can withdraw from the research

study without penalty, and any data involving them would be securely stored and discarded after completion of my study. There was a minimum requirement of 24 hours before the participant could return the signed consent form so that they had time to decide. There was no foreseeable risk to the participants in this research study. To maintain participant confidentiality pseudonyms were assigned to both the research participants and also the university; in addition, all recorded files, interview transcriptions, and other participant information were stored on a password-protected computer or in a secure filing cabinet and only viewed by myself.

In order to ensure I am adhering to research ethics and protecting the rights of human subjects, I requested and received approval of my study from the Institutional Review Board (See Appendix D).

Subjectivity Statement

According to Peshkin (1988), “Researchers should systematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of their research” (p. 17). Over time I have learned and realized teacher evaluation is a sensitive subject at every level of education and one with many strong opinions. My senior year as an undergraduate student, an instructor compared handwritings in order to confront me based on the comments I left in an evaluation the previous semester. What the instructor had to say was far from professional and very offensive. This experience really made me question the anonymity of students, the professionalism of instructors, and the evaluation process in general. My subjectivities are a product of two personal roles I played in the process of faculty evaluation, both of which are elaborated on: (1) I am a graduate student and (2) I am a high school science teacher.

As previous undergraduate college student myself, I have had to complete many evaluation forms throughout the years, and will need to continue to complete them as a graduate

student until I complete my degree. Because of my experiences, I have shaped my own perceptions throughout the process of evaluating teachers. Since I recruited my participants from the student body of a university, it was very important that I addressed my subjectivities, so that I could avoid any personal bias I might have had. I agree with Laws, Apperson, Buchert, and Bregman (2010), who said students tend to form lasting impressions on the first day of class; in my experiences, most of the time I felt I had the instructor figured out by day one, and those impressions stuck with me throughout semesters. It was important I did not draw conclusions in such a hasty and careless manner; I did not assume other students shared my experiences so that I could see and hear other possibilities.

As a high school science teacher 5 percent of my overall rating were constructed based on the evaluations and ratings students completed of me. Evaluation in general makes me anxious, since it played such a critical role in my potential tenure. Just as they affect professors in universities, these evaluation ratings affected me professionally and personally. Dicks, Pruitt, & Tilley (2010) said students walk into a classroom carrying every educational experience on their shoulders; I have been involved in education so long that my experiences as a student and experience teaching really influence my perceptions of instructional methods and teacher effectiveness.

In order to illustrate my awareness, it was important that I discussed and reflected upon of my subjectivities. Glesne (2006) made a powerful statement about subjectivity that I try to remain conscious of throughout my research:

Keeping track of your subjective selves and then inquiring into their origins can make you aware not only of your own perspectives, but also how those perspectives might lead

you to ask certain questions (and not others) and to make certain interpretations (and not others) of interactions within the research setting. (p 154)

Identifying my subjectivities has resulted in a more open-minded approach to my research.

Validity and Trustworthiness

While eliminating all bias and subjectivity is impossible, there are procedures that can be taken to ensure trustworthiness and increase validity (Glesne 2006). In order to increase validity I used multiple sources of data, consisting of interviews, field notes, observations, and peer evaluations. I used member checks, which are a method of ensuring I do not misinterpret the meaning of what my participants said and the perspectives they may have (Maxwell, 2012). To adhere to this principle I provided a copy of the transcribed interviews to each participant before analyzing them. Triangulation uses multiple sources of data in research in order to reduce the risk of bias (Glesne, 2006; Mathison, 1988; Maxwell, 2012). In prior sections, I outlined the specifics on how I used triangulation in both my sampling strategies and also my data collection strategies. I also actively consulted my peers and professors throughout the process of this research study. Addressing one's subjectivities and biases through means of reflexivity is done so their research becomes "more accurate, legitimate, or valid" (Glesne, 2006, p. 151). In the previous section I discussed my own subjectivities and biases in an attempt to increase the validity of my research study.

Glesne (2006) stated, "Part of demonstrating the trustworthiness of your data is to realize the limitations of your study" (p. 212). Firstly, as a qualitative researcher my goal was to not construct generalizations (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell 2012), rather I was acting as a detective to understand the perceptions and experiences of the participants in my specific case. The boundaries of my study were very specific to its location and its participants; therefore, the

findings in my study should not be considered to be true in other universities or other groups of students. I was limited to a strict time frame of two semesters to submit and complete my research study. Also, I was limited to four interviews. While these time and participant constraints still provided me with a rich amount of data, more time and participants could have potentially increased the validity of this study.

This chapter discussed, in detail, the methods, methodology, theoretical perspective, sampling strategies, setting, participants, data collection, data analysis, subjectivity, trustworthiness, validity, and ethical issues associated with my research study. In order to conduct a research study that is credible it was important to inform each section using reputable, valid sources. The purpose of this chapter was to set the stage for how I intend to carry out my research study. Reflecting and recording my own subjectivities will help me remain perceptive as I conduct my research. I wanted to also display my consciousness at prioritizing participant confidentiality and ethical codes, and to do so I discussed the channels by which I requested and received IRB approval. Each section within this chapter was an important aspect of my research study, and while each section may appear to stand alone, they were all integrated and a crucial piece of the magnificent puzzle of qualitative research; that being said, it is the conjunction of each that strengthened this interpretive case study.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation & Analysis

Thomas (2003) said that data should be analyzed with a hybrid approach, using the research questions deductively and the analysis and interpretations of my data inductively (p. 239). Using his method as my template, I used the following research questions to develop an interview guide (see Appendix B):

- 1) What are students' understandings of the IDEA faculty evaluations completed at the end of their courses?
- 2) How do students' different classroom experiences in the education and science departments influence their responses on the IDEA evaluations?
- 3) What student experiences influence and shape their responses on the IDEA evaluations?

Following my first interview, however, I had to modify this guide in order to receive more data and deeper feedback. My modifications included revisions of the previous questions, additional interview questions, and additional probing questions (see Appendix C). The probing questions were used to get a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences and perceptions when their responses lacked length, depth, or clarity. The modified version of my interview guide served as an excellent tool for pacing and transitioning through the different phases of my interview questions, and as a result I was able to secure a source of rich data.

Presentation of Data

The purpose of this study was to understand how students perceive the faculty evaluation system at the university level and how their experiences shape their responses during this process. In order to gain this understanding, the modified interview guide was used to interview four upper-division level undergraduate students majoring in secondary education with a concentration in science, specifically biology and earth science. Each interview lasted

approximately one hour in length and was recorded using an electronic voice-recording device. Immediately following each interview, I repeatedly listened to the recordings in order to take field notes and type transcriptions of the conversations shared between each participant and myself. Once the transcriptions were complete, I provided each participant with a copy of our conversation during the interview to begin member checks (##). With the exception of two spelling errors, all four participants agreed with what was said on the transcriptions and reported the conversations were written as they remembered them. Following their confirmations, I read through the combined total of 71 pages multiple times and created a list of codes for each participant. The codes were then compiled into a single, congruent list, representing a total of 66 codes between all four participants (see Table 1).

Using both the transcripts and also the combined list of codes, I had begun to group the codes into categories based on trends. The eight categories (see Table 1) that seemed to envelope all of the 66 codes were *Feelings Toward Evaluation*, *Suggested Improvements*, *Factors that Affect Evaluation Ratings*, *Factors that do NOT Affect Evaluation Ratings*, *Feelings Toward Education Department*, *Feelings Toward Science Department*, *Teacher Characteristics*, and *Instruction Characteristics*. These categories were chosen deductively, with the research questions in mind, and inductively, using the data as a means to analyze and make sense of the data (Thomas, 2003). Each code is separated by two slash marked, //. The asterisks represent a code that was discussed by each participant, but that was not agreed upon in unison; these codes will be described in detail in the analysis portion of this chapter. *Perceptions of Faculty Evaluation*, *Perceptions in Science Education*, and *Factors that Influence Evaluation* are the three themes in which each category will be organized within (see Table 2). Beneath each theme, written in italics, is the research question displays the greatest alignment.

Table 1

Code Grouping by Category

Code Categories:	Codes:
Feelings Toward Evaluation:	Just get it over with // I take it seriously // I answer all questions Terrible process // Professors & students don't take it seriously Both departments do not take seriously // I don't feel informed Inaccurate representation of professor performance It's good to evaluate our professors // I want them to know how I feel I like having a "voice" // Write comments if I had a strong feeling 5-30 seconds per question // 5-20 minutes for whole form Some questions are "fluff" // My feedback isn't valued They don't affect me // I don't feel anything changes as a result Don't think it should influence greatly, unless really bad*
Suggested Improvements:	More details to respond to // Mid-semester evaluations Get rid of fluff // Electronic system Would take more seriously if professors valued feedback Use a randomly selected group of students instead of whole class Add external evaluators // Comment box
Factors that Affect Evaluation Ratings:	Received grade // Grading scale Perceived learning // Course difficulty Workload & Coursework Attractiveness
Factors that do NOT Affect Evaluation Ratings:	Gender Class Size*
Feelings Toward Education Department:	Easier // More willing to help Values responses/feedback // More participation More effort & motivation More materials // Less lecture Evaluates more positively
Feelings Toward Science Department:	Not very helpful or attentive to students Little communications Harder Boring
Teacher Characteristics	Committed // Available // Attentive to students, builds relationships Caring & Encouraging // Enthusiastic & Motivating // Self-reflective // Knowledge of subject // Prepared for class Organized // Respectful
Instruction Characteristics.	Differentiates instruction // Actively engages students Balanced lecturing // Clear Hates busy work Uses technology & materials Not a fan of distance learning Fast feedback // Relevancy

Table 2

Category Grouping by Theme

Code Categories:	Themes:
Feelings Toward Evaluation:	<p style="text-align: center;">Perceptions of Faculty Evaluation <i>What are student's understandings of the IDEA faculty evaluations completed at the end of their courses?</i></p>
Suggested Improvements:	
Feelings Toward Education Department:	<p style="text-align: center;">Perceptions in Science Education <i>How do student's different classroom experiences in the education and science departments influence their responses on the IDEA evaluation?</i></p>
Feelings Toward Science Department:	
Factors that Affect Evaluation Ratings:	<p style="text-align: center;">Factors that Influence Evaluation <i>What student experiences influence and shape their responses on the IDEA evaluations?</i></p>
Factors that do NOT Affect Evaluation Ratings:	
Teacher Characteristics	
Instruction Characteristics	

Following the creation and revision of the codes, categories, and themes, I carried out another set of member checks. A copy of tables 1 and 2 were given to each of my four participants to check, revise, make suggestions, and provide feedback. After two weeks, all four participants replied, verifying their agreement with the means by which the data was analyzed and also how it was organized.

Data Analysis

The analysis of my data was conducted by observing patterns emerging throughout the responses of my research participants while keeping my research questions in mind. Through the use of voice-recorded participant interviews, typed interview transcriptions, and multiple member checks, I was able to secure a source of rich data. As a result, the codes, categories, and themes seen on tables 1 and 2 in the previous section can be aligned and used to suggest answers to each research question. My themes and categories will be used as a template to guide and discuss my data analysis throughout this section. Each theme will be followed by subheadings, which represent the categories that constructed each of the three themes

Perceptions of Faculty Evaluation

What are students' understandings of the IDEA faculty evaluations completed at the end of their courses? In order to answer my first research question it was important to understand what perceptions students had on the process of faculty evaluation. When I asked students how informed they felt on the process of evaluating their professors three out the four of four said, "not very". The fourth participant, John, said he felt mildly familiar with the process since he had spoken personally with a professor once about how long it took to receive the results; however, this one-on-one conversation was the only instance in which a professor had spoken about the process to him. All of the participants reported professors rarely scratched the surface when

describing the evaluation process, and most never described them at all. Since my goal was to learn how students make sense of faculty evaluation, and it became clear to me all four candidates lacked understanding of the process, I had to dig a little deeper. This realization led me to categorize their responses according to *Feelings Toward Evaluation* and *Suggested Improvements*, which describe how students felt about evaluation, how they perceived others felt about evaluation, and some suggestions each candidate believed could improve the system.

Feelings Toward Evaluation

“Just get it over with, honestly”, said Becca when asked the first thing that comes to mind when asked to evaluate her professors at the end of each course. The range in response time for each question was between 5 and 30 seconds, and the range in response time for the entire form was between 5 and 20 minutes for all four participants. While each candidate agreed they liked having a voice, none of them felt their responses were taken seriously. Ben thinks the evaluation form is “a very inaccurate representation of how the professor does” and John said, “it’s terrible, I mean it’s absolutely terrible.” Interestingly enough, each of them said they try to take answering the evaluation questions seriously; however, they do not feel other students take it seriously. Also, all four candidates agreed in their perceptions when describing how describing the professor’s level of seriousness, indicating they felt their responses, feedback, and the evaluation process itself was not taken seriously by the instructor. Ben said when it was time for evaluations professors, “usually joke about it or nothing is said”. John shared that one professor said, “here it is again, you know how it works, I’m going to leave the room, let me know when you’re done.” I found this particularly interesting since it implied this specific professor was under the assumption most students understand how the evaluation process works. With the exception of one or two professors, participants indicated the overwhelming majority of their

instructors did not describe the evaluation process or how the ratings were used. This leads me to believe students at Yellowstone University appear to be quite uninformed of this process.

I found it interesting that each candidate felt they took the evaluation system seriously; however, the longest response time indicated for a single question was 30 seconds. Between 5 and 20 minutes is all it took for each student to evaluate their professor's performance over the course of an entire semester. This begs me to ask the question, are students really taking the evaluation forms seriously? It's hard to say; however, one candidate indicated they never provided feedback in the comments section, two said they only do if the professor was really bad or really good, and the other said they always try to write a comment. In every case, though, students indicated they were more likely to both write in the comments section and also take the form itself much more seriously if they felt their feedback was valued. "She actually asked us... she gave her own personal evaluation continuously throughout the semester," said John; when I asked John if he took this professor's evaluation more seriously, he responded, "yeah, for sure, yeah." This was actually the case for all four candidates when asked if knowing their feedback mattered increased their effort and level of seriousness when evaluating their instructors. Overall, students didn't indicate having very positive perceptions, experiences, or feelings toward the IDEA evaluation process at Yellowstone University, and the participants felt the attitudes of their professor's and other students were negative, too.

Suggested Improvements

Every candidate felt something could be added to the student evaluation process to increase its validity and the likeliness that students take it more seriously. Only one candidate felt once a year was a sufficient frequency for students to evaluate their professors. The others felt a second evaluation should take place during the middle of the semester so professors could

modify their instruction if necessary; however, the candidates said this would only be effective if the professors received the feedback promptly. Becca said, “at the end of the semester we are all doing finals work and stuff, and so a lot of the students are angry and stuff and they are just trying to get this over with so they can get out of this class,” suggesting that maybe results aren’t always fair or unbiased at the end of the term. Every candidate said questions should be in more detail regarding the class, and some of the “fluff” questions should be removed. The questions perceived as fluff varied from candidate to candidate. “Get the information back sooner,” was John’s main criticism regarding student evaluation; the electronic way would save you several steps, uhm, that would definitely decrease feedback time.” Ben suggested using a random selected group of students, rather than the entire class each semester; he feels empowering students with the ability to evaluate their instructors a couple times throughout their college career, rather than at the end of every class every semester, would yield more effort on the students part to answer them honestly. This could be effective, but it also presents a problem if a large enough sample size isn’t chosen in a class. Sarah recommends having a comment box for each professor located in an accessible location where students could anonymously say how they felt about different lessons and the class, she gave examples such as, “what you did today I really understand, this completely threw me through a loop, maybe this would be easier.” She thinks this would enable professors with a system of quick feedback that doesn’t affect their careers yet still enable them to modify their instructional practices. We know the system is not a perfect one, and these are just some recommendations from the student body on how to improve student evaluation at Yellowstone University.

Perceptions in Science Education

I was curious to see how student experiences varied between departments at Yellowstone University, which led to my next research question: how do students' different classroom experiences in the education and science departments influence their responses on the IDEA evaluations? In order to answer this question I asked my participants to share their experiences throughout their careers at the university within these departments. Their responses were grouped into two categories appropriate for answering this question, *Feelings Toward Education Department* and *Feelings Toward Science Department*. What I found was that students reported rating their education professors more positively overall. The following sections will explain and describe the experiences my participants shared that led to this discovery.

Feelings Toward Education Department

Easier, more willing to help, more classroom participation, more materials, and less time spent lecturing were all common codes when describing the education department amongst all four students I interviewed. “The education teachers are usually more caring, more motivated, and more available. They’re usually the better teachers for me, in my experiences, than the science,” Sarah explained. She also said compared to the science department, though, the education department was quite unorganized. John said, “the education teachers have definitely been more attentive to the students, uhm, more caring about what goes on as opposed to the one’s in my science classes.” Becca feels teachers in the education department are better teachers, stating, “they are there to teach because they went into education themselves, where a lot of the science professors didn’t, they just went in for like research studies... ..their goal in life was not to be a teacher.” Ironically enough, although students indicated rating their education professors more positively, all four candidates felt neither the education department, nor the science department took student evaluations seriously.

Feelings Toward Science Department

One of the codes that kept recurring throughout my participant interviews in regards to the science department was the poor communication of the professor. Sarah indicated she feels the science department, specifically the biology department, should offer help sessions for students struggling with material. While all the candidates reported the science department was harder, boring, and less engaging, Ben said that, “professors need technology training.” Actually, each of the four participants mentioned the lack of technology outside of the of education department. Students said the science professors were harder to reach during both office hours and also via email, which was a large contribution to why they were rated more negatively compared to the education department.

Factors that Influence Evaluation

The experiences students have and their perceptions of their professors are what lead them to complete evaluations the way that they do, whether positively, negatively, seriously, or carelessly. My third and final research question was intended to learn about these factors and experiences that the students at Yellowstone University felt influenced their evaluating ratings. What student experiences influence and shape their responses on the IDEA evaluations? There are four categories that make up the theme I feel answered this question. The first two are the factors that affect and do not affect evaluation ratings as perceived by the participants I interviewed. While the characteristics that encapsulate an instructor and their teaching styles are very related, for the sake of my research I felt separating the codes into two separate categories was necessary. I did this because, as a teacher myself, I felt we often times model ideals that are not always our own and teach in styles that are not always our best fit because we owe it to the diverse groups of students that come through our classrooms. For this reason *Factors that Affect*

Evaluation Ratings, Factors that do NOT Affect Evaluation Ratings, Teacher Characteristics, and Instruction Characteristics are the four categories that follow. The research question will be answered throughout the discussions of each category that follows.

Factors that Affect Evaluation Ratings

All four candidates stated that without a doubt other students rated professors based on course difficulty, received grade, and workload; however, each of them said they personally tried not to let these factors affect their ratings. John admittedly stated, “I probably do, just to be fair about it, you know I try to not do it, but it’s inevitable. If it’s easier, you’re going to enjoy it more.” Sarah agreed, saying, “so if it’s hard they’re going to put bad grades, and if it was easy, they’ll be fine.” Received grade refers to the grade that students believe they will earn at the end of the course. Whether this grade is known for certainty or not, Ben said, “I think that it significantly plays... I think if you’re like, well I’m upset because I have a D, I’m going to give him a bad thing even though it could possibly be the student’s fault.” Each of the four participants agreed that workload affected the way students rate their professors; however, they all also agreed this was only the case if the work was not relevant to their perceived learning. “Busy work” was the term used to describe course work by Sarah and Becca used to fill time that was not perceived to be relevant. Ben and John both agreed, though they didn’t use similar terminology. John said, “if students feel swamped, they are not going to enjoy the class as much.” Although unique in his statement, Ben felt that attractiveness played a role in students evaluating their professors and said, “if the teacher’s good looking they’ll be like, I’ll give her a good score.” The four volunteers admitted that the amount of learning each of them perceived they were a part of or gained throughout the course played a large role in the end of course evaluations. One student actually claimed that even though his professor didn’t do much

teaching, he learned a lot from reading the textbook, and therefore rated this professor more positively. Becca had an experience where the grading scale was changed so that an A was earned by receiving a grade on a much shorter range, such that between a 95 and 100 was an A. When asked if this affected the way she evaluated her professors, she said, “yes... yes.” This series of claims leads me to believe that each of the codes viewed within the category of *Factors that Affect Evaluation Ratings* on Table 1 do in fact affect the way students evaluate their professors at Yellowstone University.

Factors that do NOT Affect Evaluation Ratings

When I asked the candidates if gender affected the way they evaluate their professors, all of them denied this to be true. Also, they felt other students do not rate professors based on gender. This mutual feeling between themselves and other students was not the case for any of the factors mentioned in the previous section. “No, I don’t personally. That doesn’t affect my opinion on how I rate them, and I don’t think it does for other students either. At all,” said, Sarah. The other three participants had similar responses. When inquired about class size, each of the participants shared similar responses, suggesting that neither themselves nor other students let this affect their evaluations of instructors.

Teacher Characteristics

The characteristics that students said led them to rate professors more positively are listed in Table 1. On the flipside, the lack of these characteristics tended to result in more negative rating. Among all of the codes in this list, availability and caring were by far the most repeated throughout every interview with each of the four participants. “She really helped me by just being available in her office hours and responding fast to emails,” said Ben. When I asked Becca directly what characteristics led her to rate a professor more positively she responded right away

with, “if they are available and willing to help me when I have a question, and just that I know they actually care.” John listed caring among the three characteristics he felt every teacher should have. Ben agreed. Sarah said, “yeah availability, uhm, if you act like you want me to succeed then I’m going to rate you better.” Along with caring, words and phrases such as encouraging, motivating, builds relationships, and is self-reflective were used on multiple occasions throughout the interviews. Knowledge of subject, another one of John’s three main characteristics, was important to students. Ben shared that, availability and uhm, being organized and having knowledge of their content,” was important to him. While the teacher characteristics listed in Table 1 hardly scratch the surface of the qualities that make up effective teachers, they are the responses that were repeatedly and consistently mentioned throughout the interviews as to having a direct effect on evaluation ratings.

Instruction Characteristics

Not only the personality of an instructor mattered to students, but also the manner by which they teach. “If they put effort into teaching, or if they come in and like you say just lecture without any technology, anything to like stimulate your mind, stimulate your learning,” said Ben in response to being asked which factors influenced the way he rated professors. Students said lecture was a necessary part of instruction, however relying on solely lecturing led to negative ratings. John said, “lecture the whole class period, every class period is definitely going to affect the way I evaluate a teacher.” Students enjoy differentiated instruction and the use of technology. Actually all four candidates reported the use technology as a necessary part of instruction and engaging students. Prompt feedback was important to my volunteers, and Becca said she reflected a lot when evaluating her professors on, “If they gave us like a ton of busy work that was never graded or handed back.” Students reported materials mattered. John said the geology

department had trays of fossils to hold and manipulate, expressing, “learning that from a diagram just wouldn’t have been the same.” Students feel technology really has a way of enhancing and stimulating learning. When asked how professors can make learning more interesting, Sarah replied,

Ah geez, technology, big time, and not just power points. Uhm, a lot of times I feel like when I’m in a science course, I learn more in lab because it’s hands on. This is where I would like to see more of what she was saying. This allows the reader to fully understand her comment, and gives them the ability to analyze the response as well. You should have a good paragraph backing up several of your participant’s responses.

Ben also expressed the same feelings as Sarah. He explains,

I think lecturing done in the right way is fine, using technology incorporated with other activities. I think to some extent lecturing is necessary but that’s not the only tool that should be used the whole semester. Again a few more sentences from Ben’s comment. described Ben. So, to recap, differentiated instruction, relevancy of work, use of technology, and prompt feedback were all very important to each candidate and played a role on how students rated their professors at Yellowstone University.

Did you address the research questions in Chapter 4?

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this interpretative case study was to understand how students perceive the faculty evaluation system at the university level and how their experiences shape their responses during this process. I learned some particularly interesting information regarding the perceptions of students at Yellowstone University majoring in secondary education with a concentration of science. These experiences were supplemented with a series of suggestions on how to improve a system that is otherwise perceived as crippled. I was able to retrieve accounts from these volunteers describing their experiences in the science and education departments; furthermore, I was provided with a list of teacher and instructional characteristics that students tend to look for in their professors. The summary and discussion that follow will describe these accounts in more detail.

Summary of Findings (about 1 page)

Although students at Yellowstone University felt the current system of faculty evaluation was an ineffective one, they did feel their professors should be held accountable based on their performance and it was important to them that they had a voice during this process, similar to what Ahmadi, Helms, and Raiszadeh (2001). I discovered the following answers to each of my research questions:

1. What are students' understandings of the IDEA faculty evaluations completed at the end of their courses?
 - a. Students reported feeling fairly uninformed with the IDEA process. All of the four candidates felt neither other students nor the faculty took the evaluations seriously, that nothing changed as a result of their feedback, and perceived the current student evaluation system as ineffective for fairly judging their professors.

Each candidate suggested methods to improve the system, such as adding mid-semester evaluations, smaller sample groups, comment boxes, or electronic systems.

2. How do students' different classroom experiences in the education and science departments influence their responses on the IDEA evaluations?
 - a. Each candidate reported the education department was easier, more attentive to students, more available/willing to help, more motivating/encouraging, and generally “better teachers” when compared to the science department, however, the education department was also perceived to be less organized. Regardless students described their evaluations of the education professors were generally more positive ones when compared to their science professors, not because they taught science, but rather due to the differences in teaching characteristics and styles.
3. What student experiences influence and shape their responses on the IDEA evaluations?
 - a. The teacher characteristics that students indicated led to more positive ratings were the following, in order of most mentioned to least mentioned: available, caring, knowledgeable, organized, prepared, motivating, encouraging, attentive, enthusiastic, self-reflective, and committed. The instructional characteristics that led students to more positive evaluation ratings were differentiated instruction, engagement, staggered lecturing, relevant workload, use of technology, and prompt feedback. It is worth mentioning that students reported the lack of the characteristics described in the previous two lists led to more negative evaluation ratings.

Discussion of Results and Conclusions (about 3 pages)

The limitations of this study are important to keep in mind. Glesne (2006) said when conducting qualitative research, it is not our job to make generalizations; therefore, I cannot make the presumption that the findings of my studies are true for other universities or student bodies. Firstly, my findings and volunteers were limited to the participating institution, Yellowstone University, and I was limited to the responses of four individuals. Also, I was limited to two semesters to submit my research proposal, conduct my research study, analyze my data, and submit my results, so time was an absolute boundary of this study. While this sample size and time frame able to produce a rich amount of data, the results cannot be generalized outside of the boundaries of this study.

My methodology was an effective one for the purpose of this study. Case studies assume that an issue, or case, is confined within a “bounded system” (Creswell, 2007). My case was bounded by a multitude of limitations. I was able to secure multiple volunteers to conduct participant interviews and peer evaluations, so the method by which I approached recruiting participants fell into place efficiently. I was able to answer the research questions associated with my case study using this sample group, however, with more time and participants, my study could have potentially been more valid. Unfortunately, of the studies I found regarding SETs, none compared the potential variances of student perceptions and experience between departments at a university, so my study was unique in those findings. When we compare the rest of the results of this study to others conducted at other universities, we find they are quite similar, though.

My study discovered that the students at Yellowstone University felt neither other students nor the professors took SETs seriously, however, they felt the process was necessary. It

is hard to say, but with more participants, I might have found results similar to Al-Issa and Sulieman (2007) who found a near equal amount of students agreed, disagreed, and were unsure if students took the SETs seriously. In this study, though, all four participants shared their feelings in the general lack of seriousness regarding SETs throughout each department. My participants also stated that the reason they felt other students did not take SETs very seriously because they do not perceive that their professors did, similar to what the students that participated in a study conducted by Ahmadi, Helms, and Rasizdeh (2001). Contradictory to their findings, though, and similar to those of Brown (2008), the students believed that conducting mid-semester evaluations would increase the performance of the instructors. The other studies throughout the literature review did not report students suggesting methods by which to improve the evaluating instructor performance like this study and its themes did.

Students revealed that received grade and perceived learning impacted the ways by which they rate instructors. Addison, Best, and Warrington (2006) found higher grades led to higher evaluations and Ali-Issa and Sulieman (2007) had 32% of their students admit to letting grades influence their evaluations. Similar results for perceived learning were indicated in research conducted by Sepehri (2010) Crumbley, Hencry, and Kratchman (2001), and also Culver (2010). As a result, the assumption that grades and perceived learning affect students at a multitude of universities across the globe.

Class size and gender were not indicated to play a role in the process of my participants evaluating their professors. This was contradictory to the results of Addison, Best, and Warrington (2006) who reported that class size influence student responses. My study contributed to the inconclusiveness of the gender debate in SETs. While my study suggested students don't let gender play a role throughout the IDEA process, there are a multitude of

studies both supporting and refuting this idea. For this reason, I cannot make any assumptions regarding this possibility at other universities.

Khaled and Donald (2009) classified the traits students perceived were important into five categories: (1) personality, (2) communication skills, (3) style of class management and student evaluation, (4) qualification and credential, and (5) teaching style (p. 125). The themes *teacher characteristics* and *instruction characteristics* can be compared similarly. In both my study and also this one we found that students want professors who are experts in their field (knowledgeable), use a variety of methods and teaching styles (differentiated instruction, consistently engages and stimulate students (engagement and stimulation), and maintains strong communication skills (availability and relationship building). What my participants did not mention, however, that the participants of Khaled and Donald (2009) did is that they valued professors who had cross-curricular knowledge. We can see some of the other responses my participants shared in a similar study conducted by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007), who found students wanted professors who were responsive (provides frequent, meaningful feedback) and student centered (attentive to students). Al-issa and Sulieman (2007) found that building relationships with students also impacted evaluation ratings, similar to my study.

Implications (or Recommendations)

This study reaffirms what many research studies have already found, that biases seem to play a role in the performance evaluations of instructors by students (Addison, Best, & Warrington, 2006; Al-Issa, & Sulieman, 2007; Basow, 1995; Beyers, 2008; Campbell, Gerdes, Holley, & Steiner, 2006; Culver, 2010; Deborah, 2008; Lawson, & Stephenson, 2005; Thornton, Adams, & Sepehri, 2010; Whitworth, Price, & Randall, 2002). This study also suggests, at least at Yellowstone University, that students and professors do not seem to take the IDEA process

very seriously. Unfortunately this study did not contribute to current knowledge regarding professors engaging in unproductive or ineffective teaching strategies in order to increase their evaluation ratings.

This study indicates that policy and practice are two areas that students and professors need to take more seriously. The simplest way I think this system could be rapidly improved is by having professors give an in-depth discourse on how the evaluations work, what the ratings are used for, and how the feedback is valued. Each of my participants reported taking the evaluations more seriously when they knew the professors valued their feedback.

This research study was able to provide two things to the students who voluntarily participated. The first was the experience to learn about the IDEA evaluation process with which they have been and will continue to be an active part of at Yellowstone University. The second bit was an opportunity for students to self-reflect on the potential biases that may or may not affect the ways they have rated their professors in the past. I believe that as a result of this new insight, the students participating in this study might take a new perspective during the process of evaluating their professors.

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Appendix A

Participant Consent Form

Research: Student Perceptions and Experiences while evaluating Their Instructors

Investigator: [REDACTED]

The purpose of this study was to understand how students perceive the faculty evaluation system at the university level and how their experiences shape their responses during this process. I am particularly interested in learning how informed you are regarding the process of student evaluation of teaching, how your experiences differ between the education and science departments, and finally what experiences and factors influences your responses on the evaluation forms. I am asking for your permission to use the information you disclose in this research study. The information I gather from you will aid in the understanding of how students make sense the evaluation process.

At least three undergraduate secondary education science majors will be interviewed. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions and talk about your experiences thus far when evaluating your instructors. You will be interviewed at least once, and each interview should last approximately one hour.

This research will take place during the Spring of 2013, and all interviews will be scheduled to occur during that time. There are no foreseeable risks for you to participate in this research; furthermore, no compensation will be provided.

Information gathered about you for this study will be kept private, available only to me and, if necessary, to the professional review boards responsible for monitoring my research. Computer records and printed records will be secured in password protected or locked files, and only I will be able to access them. Your name will not be used in any written results of my work. Instead, a pseudonym will be assigned to you.

Your participation in my research is your choice. By signing this statement, you are volunteering to participate in my research. However, you may choose at any time to discontinue your participation, and you will not be penalized for doing so. Any information about you already gathered for the research will be stored and will not be used in the study.

If at any time you have any questions about the research or about your rights you may contact me by email ([jb\[REDACTED\]s21@sumnerschools.org](mailto:jb[REDACTED]s21@sumnerschools.org)) or by my personal phone at 615-[REDACTED].

Student Perceptions and Experiences throughout the process of student evaluation of teaching.

CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS

I, _____, have read the letter of consent regarding the student
(please print name)
 evaluation of teaching research study of conducted by in [REDACTED]. I understand that if
 I choose to participate, my anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the
 course of this study. I understand that I will not receive any compensation for this study and that
 I also may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty.

Please initial within the appropriate line below below:

_____ I choose to participate in this research study

_____ I choose NOT to participate in this research study

(participant consent/signature)

(date)

(researcher consent/signature)

(date)

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Tell me what you know about this form. (Provide them a copy of the evaluation form)
2. At the end of the semester when you are handed this form, what comes to mind?
3. How informed are you with the process of evaluating your instructors?
4. How do you feel about the process of evaluating your instructors?
5. How many times per semester do you feel your instructors should be evaluated?
6. What is your opinion on the use of student evaluation ratings in a professor's career?
7. How seriously do you take the process of evaluating your instructors?
8. How many questions do you tend to answer on these evaluation forms?
9. What type of responses do you tend to write in the comments section?
10. How much time do you think you dedicate to reading and answering each question on the evaluation forms?
11. In your experiences, how have your instructors tended to approach the topic of administering student evaluation forms?
12. How do you think your responses on these forms affect you?
13. How would your responses be affected if the evaluation forms were not completed anonymously?
14. In your opinion, what qualities and characteristics make up an effective teacher?
15. What is your opinion on lecturing?
16. What is your opinion about websites like ratemyprofessors.com?
17. What experiences do you have trying to learn about your instructor prior to registering for a class?
18. How often do you feel students rate their instructors based on course difficulty?
19. How often do you feel students rate their instructors based on received grades?
20. How often do you feel students rate their instructors based on work-load / coursework?
21. How often do you feel students rate their instructors based on gender?
22. How often do you feel students rate their instructors based on perceived learning, that is, the amount of learning a student feels they have participated in?
23. How often do you feel students rate their instructors based on class size?
24. What other factors do you feel have an influence on the way you rate professors?
25. What experiences in your classes tend to lead you to rate an instructor negatively?
26. What experiences in your classes tend to lead you to rate an instructor positively?
27. How do your experiences as a student differ from the education department to the science department?
28. How do these experiences shape your responses when evaluating your education professors vs. your science professors?
29. In your opinion, how do you feel the departmental attitudes on student evaluation of teaching vary between the education and the science departments?
30. Explain to me how you feel about the way each department values your feedback.
31. If you could change one thing about the evaluation process of instructors, what would it be?
32. What should I have asked you that I did not think to ask?

Appendix C

Modified Interview Questions

1. Tell me what you know about this form. (Provide them a copy of the evaluation form)
2. At the end of the semester when you are handed this form, what comes to mind?
3. How informed are you with the process of evaluating your instructors?
4. How do you feel about the process of evaluating your instructors?
5. How many times per semester do you feel your instructors should be evaluated?
6. What is your opinion on the use of student evaluation ratings in a professor's career?
 - Why do you think professors should be more/less accountable?
7. How seriously do you take the process of evaluating your instructors?
8. How many questions do you tend to answer on these evaluation forms?
 - If all answered, why do you answer them all?
 - Are there any questions you tend to give *more* attention to?
 - Why?
 - Are there any questions you tend to give *less* attention to?
 - Why?
9. What type of responses do you tend to write in the comments section?
 - Why?
10. How much time do you think you dedicate to reading and answering each question on the evaluation forms?
 - What about the comments section?
11. In your experiences, how have your instructors tended to approach the topic of administering student evaluation forms?
 - How do professors describe the evaluation forms?
 - How do professors describe the ratings are used? (By them, personally, or university)
12. How do you think your responses on these forms affect you?
13. How would your responses be affected if the evaluation forms were not completed anonymously?
14. In your opinion, what qualities and characteristics make up an effective teacher?
 - Describe one or two of your *best* professors.
 - Describe one or two of your *worst* professors.
15. What is your opinion about websites like ratemyprofessors.com?
 - Describe any experiences you have using this website or others similar to it.
 - Do you post/respond/rate professors on this website or others?
 - Why?
16. What experiences do you have trying to learn about your instructor prior to registering for a class?
 - Describe any experiences you have using this website or others similar to it.
17. What is your opinion on lecturing?
 - Explain how too much or too little lecture influences how you evaluate your professors.
18. How often do you feel students and yourself rate their instructors based on course difficulty?
19. How often do you feel students and yourself rate their instructors based on received

- grades?
20. How often do you feel students and yourself rate their instructors based on work-load / coursework?
 21. How often do you feel students and yourself rate their instructors based on gender?
 22. How often do you feel students and yourself rate their instructors based on perceived learning, that is, the amount of learning a student feels they have participated in?
 23. How often do you feel students and yourself rate their instructors based on class size?
 24. What other factors do you feel have an influence on the way you rate professors?
 - Take a moment to reflect if you'd like.
 25. Describe some experiences in your classes tend to lead you to rate an instructor negatively?
 - What professors/instructor characteristics tend to lead to more negative ratings?
 26. Describe some experiences in your classes tend to lead you to rate an instructor positively?
 - What professors/instructor characteristics tend to lead to more negative ratings?
 27. How do your experiences as a student differ from the education department to the science department?
 28. How do these experiences shape your responses when evaluating your education professors vs. your science professors?
 29. In your opinion, how do you feel the departmental attitudes on student evaluation of teaching vary between the education and the science departments?
 30. Explain to me how you feel about the way each department values your feedback.
 31. If you could change one thing about the education department what would it be?
 32. If you could change one thing about the science department what would it be?
 33. What do you enjoy about each department?
 34. If you could change one thing about the evaluation process of your instructors, what would it be?
 35. What should I have asked you that I did not think to ask?

Appendix D

IRB Approval Letter

3/19/13

Approved IRB Application

Approved IRB Application

Sent: Tuesday, November 27, 2012 7:43 PM
To: Jack B Overholser
Cc: [REDACTED]
Attachments: [REDACTED] (Overholser)-- Nov 2~1.pdf (4 MB)

Jack Overholser

Student perceptions, experiences, and biases when evaluating instructors
<<[REDACTED] (Overholser)-- Nov 26_2012.pdf>>

Your IRB Application has been approved and is attached to this email as a pdf file. Approval is for 1 year from approval date. Approval date is the date handwritten in the approval stamp at the top of page 1, Form A.

You may now conduct your research within the guidelines of your approved application. If at any time your research changes or needs to change, please contact your faculty advisor to discuss the need to file a change to your existing IRB application or a new IRB application.

Please save this file so that you may have it in the future if needed.

[REDACTED]
Graduate Studies and Research Programs Specialist

Office of Research & Graduate Studies

[REDACTED] University i P. O. [REDACTED]

Tel: [REDACTED] i Fax: [REDACTED]

[http://www.\[REDACTED\]](http://www.[REDACTED])

<[https://\[REDACTED\]](https://[REDACTED])>

[REDACTED]