



## University Students' Council Standing Policy on Teaching Quality at Western University

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## Recommendation 1: Increasing Availability of Student Feedback

**Principle:** Prior student evaluations of courses and instructors provide useful information that current and future students can use when choosing courses and planning their degree progression.

**Principle:** Information about professor teaching quality should be easily accessible and viewable by students.

**Concern:** Currently, students are not adequately aware of how prior student evaluations can be consulted.

**Concern:** Certain important measures of teaching performance, such as receipt of teaching awards, are not easily accessible to students.

**Recommendation:** UWO make the Student Questionnaires on Courses and Teaching website more prominently displayed to students, and better inform students of its ability to show teaching performance evaluations from prior years.

**Recommendation:** UWO list instructor receipt of teaching awards in the Student Centre course registration portal.

Students' experience and performance in courses is greatly impacted by the professor(s) of that course, with some sources estimating that the impact of teachers on student academic performance is two to three times larger than any other factor.<sup>1</sup> Since this factor heavily impacts student experience, students should be provided with information on teacher quality when planning their timetable. The provision of prior student evaluations to current students is already made possible at UWO through the Student Questionnaires on Courses and Teaching (SQCT) website, which has a Feedback Results section in which students can search for instructor performance evaluations from prior years.<sup>2</sup> However, many students are currently unaware of this resource, and it is not easily accessible during the course selection workflow. This information could be made more accessible to students by prominently displaying a link to the SQCT website within the Student Centre website. Particularly, the SQCT should be hyper-linked within the course registration section of the Student Centre website, ensuring that students come across this link and have the opportunity to peruse this resource while they are making course selection decisions. A brief description of the website, including its ability to display past student reviews, should also be included to inform students of this website's value.

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<sup>1</sup> RAND Corporation. *Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement*. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Student Questionnaires on Courses and Teaching. *Feedback Results*. 2018.

The receipt of teaching awards is another relevant piece of information that students should be provided with when making course selection decisions. The USC and Senate currently give out teaching awards to UWO faculty members in recognition of teaching excellence.<sup>3 4</sup> Instructors who have received this award should have this accomplishment listed in the Student Centre course registration portal, further allowing students to make informed decisions about which courses to take.

## Recommendation 2: Western Degree Outcomes

**Principle:** One of the major goals of courses at Western is to teach students broad, transferable skills that they can apply throughout their academic life.

**Principle:** University should prepare students to join and succeed in the workforce and society.

**Concern:** The broad, underlying skills that a course develops are not always clear to students.

**Concern:** Students may not realize that their course experience is connected to certain professional competencies.

**Concern:** Employers are increasingly hiring on the basis of skill set rather than just a degree, and students frequently find it difficult to articulate the full skill set they developed in their university courses.

**Recommendation:** The Western Degree Outcomes\* of a course should be highlighted to students through the syllabus, verbally by the professor, and/or through online course and departmental resources.

\*Western Degree Outcomes are professional competencies and learning outcomes that have been endorsed by the Western Senate as skills that all Western graduates should possess. Examples include knowledge, resilience and lifelong learning, and global and community engagement.

To best support intellectual development and employment prospects, universities must provide students not only with subject-specific expertise, but also with fundamental professional skills that can be applied in a wide range of employment areas. An emphasis on broad, transferable skills is particularly crucial given that over 40% of Canadian Bachelor graduates work in a field that is not closely related to their university program.<sup>5</sup> While the subject-specific expertise developed by courses is typically clear to students, the underlying professional competencies

<sup>3</sup> University Students' Council. *Teaching Awards*. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Western Senate. *Western Awards for Excellence in Teaching*. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada. *Graduating in Canada: Profile, Labour Market Outcomes and Student Debt of the Class of 2009-2010 - Revised*. 2015.

honed by their degrees are not as clearly apparent. By informing students of the professional skills developed by their degrees, university educators better empower to students to navigate the competitive labor market.

Recognizing the importance of professional skills development, in May 2016 Western Senate released a list of “Western Degree Outcomes (WDOs),” learning competencies that all Western students should have upon graduation.<sup>6</sup> These competencies are based upon the University Undergraduate Degree-Level Expectations framework proposed by the Council of Ontario Universities<sup>7</sup> and include:<sup>8</sup>

- Knowledge
- Literacies and interdisciplinarity
- Communication
- Resilience and life-long learning
- Global and community engagement
- Critical inquiry + adaptive thinking
- Professionalism and ethical conduct

The WDOs align closely with recent research on the values desired by Canadian employers with traits such as speaking, critical thinking, and reading comprehension all being highly sought.<sup>9</sup>

To the extent reasonably possible, students should be informed of the connections between their courses and these fundamental skills. Course syllabi should list the main Western Degree Outcomes targeted by a course. For instance, the Medical Sciences Honors Thesis course syllabus could explicitly note that participating in research builds resilience, lifelong learning, and often requires interdisciplinarity since one project can span multiple scientific disciplines. Additionally, departments could encourage professors to orally elaborate on the broad professional skills developed by course material and assignments. Wherever possible, these verbal articulations of competencies should link specific components of the course to specific competencies (e.g. a group presentation fosters communication skills) rather than generally outlining traits honed by the course. Specificity allows students to better understand how these competencies are developed by the course, and empowers students to more tangibly convey how their education developed professional skills to prospective employers.<sup>10</sup> Finally, professors could encourage students to reflect on and document the learning outcomes they develop during a course. Research has indicated that student-documented evidence of competencies is

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<sup>6</sup> Institutional Quality Assurance Process. The Western Degree Outcomes. *The Western Degree Outcomes*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.uwo.ca/pvp/vpacademic/iqap/doc/WDOs.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Council of Ontario Universities. *Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents: Guidelines for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations*. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Institutional Quality Assurance Process. The Western Degree Outcomes. *The Western Degree Outcomes*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.uwo.ca/pvp/vpacademic/iqap/doc/WDOs.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> RBC Royal Bank. *Humans Wanted: How Canadian youth can thrive in the age of disruption*. 2018.

<sup>10</sup> American Council on Education. *Communicating the Value of Competencies*, p. 36. 2016.

most convincing to potential employers, indicating that this method of competency articulation may be the “gold standard” to strive for.<sup>11</sup>

### **Recommendation 3: Increasing Use of Open Educational Resources**

**Principle:** Textbook and learning material costs present substantial barriers to students and hinder the accessibility of education.

**Principle:** Open educational resources are effective alternatives to traditional, costly learning materials, providing high-quality educational content without financial burden.

**Concern:** Western can increase its provision and use of open educational resources beyond current levels.

**Concern:** Limitations in the funding and scope of existing campus services with expertise in open educational resources impedes the incorporation of these free resources into curricula.

**Recommendation:** Through the eLearning Technology Team and the Instructional Technology Resource Centre, Western provide the financial and personnel resources to inform faculty of open educational resource opportunities and connect interested faculty with relevant resources and programming.

Textbook and other course-associated costs act as a barrier that impedes student learning. In a 2017 survey, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance found that Western University students spent an average of \$628 on textbooks and course packs per year.<sup>12</sup>

Students may avoid courses they would have otherwise taken due to prohibitively high textbook costs, or may enroll in a course but be unable to afford costly course resources, preventing them from fully engaging with course material.<sup>13</sup> The burdensome nature of textbook costs is illustrated by the declining percentage of students who purchase all of their textbooks as total textbook costs increase. For instance, research from British Columbia found that while more than four out of five students with textbook expenses below \$200 per semester bought all recommended and required learning material, less than half of students with textbook expenses of greater than \$800 per semester bought all learning materials.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> American Council on Education. *Communicating the Value of Competencies*, p. 21. 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. 2017. Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey. Accessed through personal correspondence with Danny Chang, Vice-President, University Students' Council and President, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

<sup>13</sup> Jhangiani, R. and Jhangiana, S. 2017. “Investigating the Perceptions, Use, and Impact of Open Textbooks: A survey of Post-Secondary Students in British Columbia.” *International Review of Research*

<sup>14</sup> Jhangiani, R. and Jhangiana, S. 2017. “Investigating the Perceptions, Use, and Impact of Open Textbooks: A survey of Post-Secondary Students in British Columbia.” *International Review of Research*

Open educational resources (OERs) are a promising solution to the access barriers and equity issues posed by expensive course educational materials. OERs are learning materials that have been open-sourced through creative commons licensing and can be freely distributed to students.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, OERs can be adapted and revised by professors to better suit a particular course. Western has already taken productive steps to connect students to OERs. Western's eLearning Technology team (ETC) and Instructional Technology Resource Centre (ITRC) provide information on open textbooks and support technologically-integrated, accessible learning.<sup>16 17</sup> The ITRC has produced digital course resources such as 'Atlas of Nerves,' an online module covering anatomy relevant for anesthesiology courses, and a digital SlideBox, a repertoire of course-related images for a histology course.<sup>18</sup>

The initial work performed by the ETC and ITRC demonstrates that these groups are highly qualified to integrate OERs into Western courses and are well-suited to lead a university-wide effort to develop and disseminate OERs on campus. These groups could be tasked with connecting interested faculty to professionally developed OERs ready for adoption into the classroom. Many implementation-ready OERs can be found in eCampusOntario's OpenTextbook library so the ETC or ITRC could be tasked with navigating these resources and identifying materials relevant for professors interested in using OERs.<sup>19</sup> A pilot project aiming to connect University of Calgary professors to OERs was supported by ten grants, with a sample grant request being \$3200, indicating that the total project was funded by roughly \$30 000.<sup>20 21</sup> Western should follow this approach and allocate \$30,000 to the ETC and/or ITRC to incentivize faculty implementation of OERs.

These bodies could also develop an introductory, faculty-facing guide on OERs. This guide could outline the merits of OERs, address frequently-asked OER questions or common OER concerns, and outline how pre-existing OERs can be identified and adopted into classrooms, or how novel OERs can be developed. Queen's University has developed a similar document that could be used as a reference for developing a Western OER guide.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> eCampus Ontario. *Tap into a World of Open Knowledge: Open Textbook Library*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.ecampusontario.ca/open-education-resources/>

<sup>16</sup> eLearning Technology Team. "About Us." 2018.

<sup>17</sup> TeachOnline. "Supporting Technology Integration – The Instructional Technology Resource Centre at Western University." 2013.

<sup>18</sup> TeachOnline. "Supporting Technology Integration – The Instructional Technology Resource Centre at Western University." 2013.

<sup>19</sup> eCampus Ontario. "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)." Nd. Accessed at: <https://openlibrary.ecampusontario.ca/frequently-asked-questions/>

<sup>20</sup> University of Calgary. "OER Pilot Project Budget: Description of OER Project." Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.ucalgary.ca/open/files/open/oer-pilot-project-budget-template.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> University of Calgary. "OER Pilot Project Budget: Description of OER Project." Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.ucalgary.ca/open/files/open/oer-pilot-project-budget-template.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Queen's University Library. "Open and Affordable Course Materials: Create Your Own Open Textbook in 4 Steps." 2018.

## Recommendation 4: Eliminating Unnecessary Textbook and Course Material Expenses

**Principle:** Western has access to a comprehensive suite of online resources through its digital library collections.

**Concern:** Lack of awareness of online resources contained in Western's digital library collections may result in unnecessary payment to acquire those resources from other sources.

**Recommendation:** Western Libraries create a working group purposed with identifying learning materials that students are currently paying for which they have free access to through Western's expansive library collections.

Western Libraries has access to an expansive, world-class collection of professional educational resources, totalling over 11 million print and electronic items.<sup>23</sup> This repository is handled by Collections Librarians, personnel tasked with maintaining access to resources and obtaining new materials that support the research and teaching aims of the university.<sup>24</sup> Each individual Collections Librarian is responsible for monitoring resources related to (a) particular subject area(s).<sup>25</sup>

Given the expansiveness of Western Libraries' Collections, it is possible that certain courses are paying for educational resources that are either freely available through Western's library resources, or that have equally-suitable alternative resources accessible through Western's library collections. Accordingly, it would be beneficial to systematically investigate whether any such 'double payments' currently exist, in order to avoid imposing unnecessary expenses on students. Recognizing this potential issue, the University of Toronto implemented a 'Zero-to-Low Cost Courses' (ZTLCC) initiative which identified and eliminated payment for resources that were already present in the university's library collections.<sup>26</sup> The ZTLCC project reached out to professors in departments that heavily used course packs and obtained syllabi for courses in these departments. Library staff then searched the library collections for material that students were currently purchasing as part of their course pack. This project found that 55% of resources that students were paying for were freely available in the university's electronic resource collection, representing a large expense that could be avoided by using the freely-available library materials.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Western Libraries. *Collections Management*. 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Western Libraries. *Principles and Guidelines for Collection Management*. 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Western Libraries. *Collections Librarians*. 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Cancilla, N. et al. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*. *Engaging Faculty and Reducing Costs by Leveraging Collections: A Pilot Project to Reduce Course Pack Use*. 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Cancilla, N. et al. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*. *Engaging Faculty and Reducing Costs by Leveraging Collections: A Pilot Project to Reduce Course Pack Use*. 2017.

A similar project should be carried out at Western to avoid systematic double-payment of already-available educational materials. Such a project would align with Western Libraries' goal to "champion open access and the transformation of scholarly communication" described in the Library Strategic plan.<sup>28</sup> The University of Toronto ZTLCC project required roughly 60 librarian working staff hours,<sup>29</sup> a figure that Western can use to determine the approximate resource allocation required to support a similar initiative. Identifying materials that students are currently paying for and could get for free through existing library resources is a feasible first step towards developing a more robust OER framework at Western.

## Recommendation 5: Expanding the Role of Peer Tutoring Services

**Principle:** Students should have reasonably convenient access to academic support resources that help them understand course content.

**Concern:** Professor office hours, while an excellent resource, are unable to provide adequate support alone, as some students are unable to attend office hours due to class conflicts or may have a learning style that does not optimally match the professor's instructional style.

**Concern:** There are many faculty- and department-specific peer academic support resources that are underutilized due to student's being unaware of these programs.

**Recommendation:** Departments maintain and distribute to professors a list of relevant academic resources, including student-led tutoring/review groups, and inform students of these additional options to receive help.

Students commonly require academic support to properly understand course content. Traditional mechanisms of offering support such as holding professor office hours or informal answering of student questions after class are beneficial, but in some cases may be insufficient by themselves to adequately support students. Students may feel uncomfortable attending office hours due to the hierarchical nature of the professor/student relationship or concerns of making a bad impression.<sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> Even when students do go to office hours, research indicates that professor/student discussions are typically short, with a mode duration of 6-10 minutes, in part due to students' concern at taking up too much of a professor's time.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Western Libraries. 2015-2020: *Strategic Plan*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/files/aboutwl/strategicplan.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Cancilla, N. et al. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*. *Engaging Faculty and Reducing Costs by Leveraging Collections: A Pilot Project to Reduce Course Pack Use*. 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Hagenauer, G. and Volet, SE. *Oxford Review of Education*. *Teacher-student relationship at university: an important yet under-researched field*. 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Li, M. and Zhao, Y. *Exploring Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*, p. 211. 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Hagenauer, G. and Volet, SE. *Oxford Review of Education*. *Teacher-student relationship at university: an important yet under-researched field*. 2014.

Limitations of traditional academic support mechanisms result in a gap that can be filled by new forms of academic assistance, such as peer tutoring (PT). PT is a broad term that encompasses many forms of student-to-student academic support, including individualized tutoring or student-led group review sessions, typically characterized by the tutor being holding a slightly more advanced academic standing than the tutee (e.g. an upper-year student tutor and a first-year student tutee). PT is generally well-received by students, with one study finding that tutees agreed that tutoring improved their understanding of course material, helped them do better on assignments, and increased their confidence.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, research has found that receiving peer-tutoring is associated with substantial course grade improvement.<sup>34</sup> PT is also viewed positively by faculty.<sup>35</sup>

Western currently has a well-developed network of PT services, ranging from centralized programs such as the Peer Academic Learning Centre and Peer Writing Advisor program to department- or course-specific programs such as the Biochemistry Club, which leads review sessions for core Biochemistry courses, and the Biology and Genetics Mentorship Programs, related programs that support first-year biology and second-year genetics courses, respectively.

The main area for improvement is improving the communication between PT programs and the courses for which they provide support. Departments should be encouraged to maintain a comprehensive list of PT groups, and professors should encourage students to reach out to these groups for assistance throughout the semester. Additionally, peer tutors should reach out to professors to determine which content areas classes are struggling with, so that they can design programming to address those weak areas. An auxiliary benefit of enhanced PT/instructor communication is PT quality assurance. Strong communication will allow instructors to informally evaluate the PT program to ensure students are receiving accurate, clear information, and instructors may provide PT organizers with their lecture notes or PowerPoint slides to enable the PT service to better align with content covered in class. Finally, PT services should develop feedback mechanisms to determine whether students found the tutoring helpful and to identify how the service can be improved for future years. To carry out these recommendations, University Students' Council Faculty Councillors may raise these points during Faculty meetings, and Faculty Council representatives can reach out to department- and course-specific PT groups, as well as the relevant instructors, to initiate this bidirectional communication.

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<sup>33</sup> Colver, M. and Fry, T. *Journal of College Reading and Learning. Evidence to Support Peer Tutoring Programs at the Undergraduate Level.* 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Colver, M. and Fry, T. *Journal of College Reading and Learning. Evidence to Support Peer Tutoring Programs at the Undergraduate Level.* 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Li, M. and Zhao, Y. *Exploring Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*, p. 220. 2015.

## Recommendation 6: Considering Teaching Quality in Hiring and Promotion

**Principle:** Teaching is a vital role of a professor, and as such, it should be prominently incorporated into professor hiring and promotion processes.

**Principle:** If professors are assessed based on teaching quality, the metric of assessment must be fair to the professor and not reflective of factors other than individual teaching quality that could impact the feedback a professor receives.

**Concern:** There are many additional roles that professors must hold, and those roles' heavy consideration in hiring and promotion processes leaves teaching quality susceptible to being undervalued.

**Concern:** In an age of digital disruption and change in societal and economic demands, the classroom experience, as a vital part of an undergraduate education, is falling behind in its innovative and learner-driven approaches.

**Recommendation:** Measures of teaching quality, including student feedback from previously taught courses, student-led recognition programs, and the use of open educational practices, be considered when evaluating a professor's candidacy for promotion (and hiring, provided such information is available).

**Recommendation:** Feedback be compared against the feedback of other instructors teaching the same or similar courses, enabling identification of and correction for biased feedback due to course-specific (rather than instructor-specific) factors.

A principal task of any university is to educate its student body. The paramount importance of this role should be reflected in faculty hiring and promotional processes, with teaching performance being a prominent factor. UWO promotion and tenure guidelines currently do include teaching as one of three areas to be considered when determining candidacy for promotion.<sup>36</sup> While these guidelines do provide some details regarding how teaching performance will be evaluated (e.g. soliciting the opinions of current and former students), they do not describe the extent to which teaching performance will be considered, allowing for undue variation in the teaching performance consideration between candidates.<sup>37</sup> In addition to potential harm caused by inter-candidate variation, the lack of information on the extent of teaching performance consideration leaves this area vulnerable to receiving less attention than is warranted due to the many other factors evaluated when assessing candidates for promotion.

<sup>36</sup> University of Western Ontario. *Promotion and Tenure*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.uwo.ca/facultyrelations/pdf/promotion/promotion-tenure-article.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> University of Western Ontario. *Promotion and Tenure*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://www.uwo.ca/facultyrelations/pdf/promotion/promotion-tenure-article.pdf>

Given this, the USC recommends that UWO develop more explicit guidelines on the extent to which teaching quality is considered when hiring and promoting faculty. Updated guidelines could specify that teaching performance will comprise at least a certain percentage of candidates' consideration for hiring or promotion. An exact number would require further investigation and faculty input to determine, but the value should be high enough to reflect that teaching performance is one of only three major areas considered when assessing promotional candidacy.

An additional limitation of the current teaching performance evaluation scheme is the manner in which it assesses student feedback. It is currently noted that teaching ability evaluations "shall include results of Student Questionnaires on Courses and Teaching (Student Evaluations)."<sup>38</sup> Incorporating the student perspective is vital when assessing teaching quality, so this is a valuable component of the current promotion application process. However, simply reviewing student evaluations may not optimally gauge instructor competency. The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Association notes that factors beyond a professor's reasonable control are associated with the feedback they receive.<sup>39</sup> Factors that may influence professor teaching scores include course difficulty, class size, lecture time, and even personal factors such as gender and race.<sup>40</sup> It is clearly unfair to faculty if a metric by which they are evaluated is partially beyond their ability to control. However, it is also harmful to students, as inaccurately measuring teaching performance may result in excellent teachers failing to obtain promotion because their teaching score was harmed by factors beyond their control (e.g. teaching an early morning class).

Accordingly, the USC recommends that, to the extent possible, UWO account and adjust for extraneous factors that impact student evaluations of teacher performance. This will preserve the crucial student perspective when determining teaching abilities, but will do so in a manner that is more fair for faculty members and better allows their teaching capabilities to be addressed. The specific methodology by which extraneous factors should be adjusted is beyond the scope of this paper and may require input from data analysis professionals. As a rough outline, a professor's student evaluations for a certain course could be compared to the evaluations that other professors received while teaching the same or similar courses. This would allow for the student evaluations to be adjusted to account for course difficulty, as the professor's score is now being considered in the context of student evaluations given during other, similarly-difficult courses. Likewise, UWO could determine the extent to which student

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<sup>38</sup> University of Western Ontario and University of Western Ontario Faculty Association. *Promotion and Tenure: 2014-2018 Faculty Collective Agreement*. Nd. Accessed at: [https://www.uwo.ca/facultyrelations/pdf/promotion/PT\\_Presentation\\_TSC\\_Dec\\_2014.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/facultyrelations/pdf/promotion/PT_Presentation_TSC_Dec_2014.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Association. *Briefing Note: Student questionnaires on courses and teaching*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA-Briefing-Note-Student-Questionnaires.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Association. *Briefing Note: Student questionnaires on courses and teaching*. Nd. Accessed at: <https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA-Briefing-Note-Student-Questionnaires.pdf>

evaluations vary based on lecture start time, and use this information to adjust the scores for professors who taught courses at early times, which has been associated with lower teaching evaluations. Further development of this rough adjustment model will allow student evaluations to be considered in a manner that better identifies teaching excellence.