

Faculty Teaching Evaluations: Re-Norming SOTES

Questions and Answers

What are norms?

At the end of each semester students evaluate the teaching effectiveness of most instructors using the SOTE (Student Opinion of Teaching Effectiveness) forms. SOTES ask 12 questions on particular aspects of teaching and one question on overall effectiveness. The evaluations from each class are processed, and a report is produced that contains an instructor's average (or mean) scores for each of thirteen rating items, plus the averages of these same items for the department, college, and university. These latter averages are called "norms." Norms, therefore, are statistics that describe behavior in a particular population, in this case, the population of instructors within a department, college, and the university.

Why are norms important?

Without norms it is difficult to interpret an instructor's scores. Are the scores below, at, or above the scores of other instructors? Norms compare an instructor's ratings with the average ratings of colleagues and, therefore, make it possible to form a better judgment about an instructor's teaching effectiveness. Although norms assist with evaluation, they are just one among many sources of information that go into a comprehensive evaluation of teaching.

How were the current norms developed?

The current norms were developed in Fall 2003 by the Office of Institutional Research (OIR). To enhance the accuracy of norms, it is essential that they not be based on a small or biased sample of SOTES. Consequently, five years ago faculty members were required to evaluate all classes and, in fact, SOTES were collected from 93% of classes. The OIR calculated the averages (means or norms) for the thirteen questions.

Why is re-norming necessary?

It is possible that teaching effectiveness changes over time, hopefully improving as instructors take advantage of new instructional techniques and classroom technologies. In addition, students' perceptions of teaching may fluctuate over time. Re-norming will make it possible to evaluate teaching effectiveness based on current instructional practices and current student perceptions.

How will re-norming work?

The Academic Senate passed new guidelines¹ permitting the norming of teaching evaluations (SOTES) every five years, which means that re-norming should be undertaken in Fall 2008. Departments (or equivalent units) will vote whether or not to evaluate all classes for purposes of updating norms. If a department does not hold vote, or by a simple majority vote opposes re-norming, then re-norming will not occur for that department. If a simple majority supports re-norming, then classes that faculty members identify for purposes of "periodic and performance evaluations" will be evaluated as usual. In addition, all other classes also will be evaluated to be used for norming purposes only. All evaluations will be used to calculate the new

¹ S08-6, Policy Recommendation, Developing Baseline Values (Norms) for the Student Opinion of Teaching Effectiveness (SOTE) Surveys for Use in Periodic and Performance Evaluations, available at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/S08-6.htm>.

norms. The results of SOTES identified for “periodic and performance evaluations” will be returned to instructors and departments as usual. All other SOTES will remain with OIR and, in the language of the Senate resolution, “be available only to individuals associated with the computation of norms.” In other words, the results of SOTES collected only for re-norming purposes will not be available to faculty or departments. The new norms may be available as early as Spring 2009.

What will happen if departments vote not to participate in the re-norming process?

If departments opt out, then their norms would not be calculated. On the SOTE report forms there will be a blank space where the department norms would usually be reported. If department norms were calculated based on the limited number of courses selected by instructors, the norms would likely be biased upwards because instructors would be inclined to select courses where they expect to receive positive ratings. The likely result of a biased sample are norms that present an artificially elevated picture of teaching effectiveness, and which therefore hold faculty to an unrealistically high standard. The chart below shows that average scores on the thirteen SOTE rating items in Fall 2003, when virtually all courses were rated as part of the last re-norming process, and Fall 2007, a recent semester when instructors were more or less free to choose which courses to evaluate. The upward bias is obvious.

While norms will not be calculated for departments that opt out, norms for colleges and the university as a whole will be calculated. The latter norms will be more or less biased—upwards or downwards—depending upon how many departments opt out. The extent and direction of the biases may not be known. The re-norming process will produce the most accurate norms if all departments participate and all classes are evaluated.

