

Course Guide's 'objectivity' masks vacuity

The 1972 Course Guide of the University of Alberta Students' Union is worse than useless: it is pernicious, and to judge by its Introduction, its compilers don't care or Don't know that it is. Its fundamental assumption, an assumption that has governed the Course Guide for a couple of years now, is that students can best choose which classes or instructors to take by studying a statistical summary of what students are willing to say in response to a series of banal statements and questions. It follows that the Course Guide cannot be based on the testimony of the most reliable witnesses. Those who know best about the quality of a course are the most intelligent students who have sat in it; those who know best are neither the instructor himself nor the average students, who half-heartedly fulfill the requirements of a course.

The fancy method this year's Guide, touted by its compilers as "an innovation in this type of statistical analysis," is merely the accumulation of cliches. We are told in the Introduction that the data from thousands of "objective" questionnaires were supplied to a computer along with 350 "verbalized statements"; "if the data meet the criteria assigned to each individual statement, that statement was printed out." In last year's Guide the data were left as percentages, but this year they have been disguised as English prose. The 350 "verbalized statements" are in fact 350 stereotypes or cliches that are judged to be sufficient to account for the myriad differences even ordinary students can perceive among their different classes and instructors.

But more important, the stereotypes printed out as paragraphs are meaningless or contradictory or ludicrous. Here is a sentence whose meaning I find hard to penetrate: "While opinions varied, feedback was generally not considered impersonal." Then ponder the contradictions in this series of judgements from the account of one unfortunate professor's class: . . . the instructor did not use class time effectively . . . the instructor stimulated thought well and communicated information well. . . . students hardly ever thought about and discussed material from the course."

There is probably a quarter-hour's good fun reading aloud sentences from the Guide. The fun derives from the odd variations in the cliches with which one class after another is described. But our laughter points to something seriously wrong with the assumptions of the Guide. It assumes that all courses are essentially the same and can be honestly evaluated by a series of standard questions. The editors seem indeed to have tried very hard to avoid mentioning anything that would distinguish one class or instructor from another. I could not possibly say which of the six men teaching Political Science 200 I would choose to study with if I had to decide from the summaries of student opinion in this Guide.

The crucial -- and pernicious -- failure of this Guide follows from its being based on a false notion of students' abilities and rights. A "Course Guide" should be a students' guide to the faculty. It should be in no way statistical; statistics in these cases are the cover for cowardice. It should be the summary of the most informed judgement about the intelligence and ability of named individual instructors, stressing how well they handle the actual intellectual material of their courses. Students should learn -- and the proper course guide should help them learn -- to choose, if at all possible, not courses, but teachers. To take a course on a subject that interests you from a man or woman who drives you to desperate boredom is very probably to turn you against your own former interest, whereas to take a course from an interesting person about something you know nothing is to expand your interests and your understanding. Students learn which courses to take by assessing the comments they hear from one another in private. A good course guide makes available to our whole community the percolated results of that opinion. The present Course Guide is pernicious because it is dull with disguised statistics, it takes no risks, it makes no judgments, it is anti-intellectual in an institution that stands for the mind.

Christopher Drummond,
English professor

It took 75,000 questionnaires, over 58,000 data cards, 460,000 words of description, eleven part-time workers and \$1.50 a copy to make this year's Course Guide. Was it worth the trouble?

head on

Statistical analysis assures accuracy

Student evaluations of University courses is not, as many think, a recent development in the College Community. Such instruments first appeared in the early 1920's when Columbia and Harvard Universities initiated a type of course evaluation scheme. By 1951, the number of American Universities and Colleges participating in some sort of course evaluation reached 40% of the total number of such institutions (Meuller, 1951) and I would expect that today nearly every major College and University on the continent has had some experience, both good and bad, with some type of evaluation project.

It must be freely admitted by all who have had any experience with student course evaluations that they have many limitations. Those who would be critical of such procedures are well aware of the inadequacies, but they fail to admit that such information can have real value to both students and faculty alike, if it is properly and intelligently used. What must be realized, in the first instance, is that the results from such a study do not represent an objective ideal, nor even a construct of a good teacher which necessarily coincides with professional standards.

We have, instead, a reflecting device in which the instructor sees his image as drawn by his students, with the danger of distortion reduced to a statistical minimum by the size of the return. The question, therefore, of validity of student judgements (the main criticism which course evaluations receive) is irrelevant.

What the guide measures is not teaching, but what students feel about teaching which is, and must remain, one of several important factors in the teaching-learning process. What we can learn is not what good teaching is or is not, but what kinds of standards students impose upon those who purport to teach. These

standards may, of course, vary widely from those which the instructor would establish to judge himself or his colleagues. Nevertheless, it is still important for the teacher to know in what mold he is cast by his students, and for the students to know the dimensions of this mold in terms of the opinions of his peers, for teaching is not an abstract but a confrontation on a personal level between student and instructor.

One of the aims of course evaluations on this campus is "to provide information for students so that they can make a more intelligent choice of courses," the implication being to steer students away from lousy instructors. While this may be a worthwhile aim, it is not a very practical one since for many students this choice simply does not exist, particularly in rigidly structured programmes.

There are, however, much more important aims which have, over the last few years, taken precedence. One of these concerns the effects that student evaluations can have on teaching effectiveness in the classroom. By providing instructors with feedback of student opinion, course evaluations can have effects limited only by the honesty of the instructor in accepting constructive criticism.

A third objective, which is just as important but not nearly so apparent, is the effect which course evaluations can have upon the awareness of both students and faculty on the quality of teaching at the University.

Elizabeth Atkinson,
Course Guide editor

forum 5

counter point

staff comment

Every kid's a buck

A friend of mine spent one summer working as a secretary for one of the higher ups in a paper-making company. After she had endeared herself to him by leaving his wife dangling at the end of a dead telephone line and by losing one of his most precious files, he finally broke down and asked her the inevitable question. "What's with young people today, any way?" So she made the inevitable reply. "Well, it's difficult to generalize, but I think that many of us are really worried about conservation and pollution control."

That bandwagon had apparently passed by his door before; he'd practiced getting on and off as quickly as possible without skinning his shins. He explained how deeply he was concerned about conserving the forests, how his company methodically replaced the trees that it used, how upset they all were by the foul-smelling gases excreted by their factories. He effused about his "concern" for a good five minutes. "But you know," he said "there's another side to the problem which you people won't understand till you are in business for yourselves." And, of course, he wasn't just changing tune-- he had picked up a brand new piccolo, for he continued, "It's economics, you know. When you come right down to it, Every tree's a buck."

Sometimes we are tempted to think of the University as a place where people have the leisure and the interest to make fully "human" judgements, a place where few people will be satisfied with evaluation simply in terms of dollars and cents. But it is exactly the commercial mentality which is manifested by student council's decision to publish a promotional magazine to lure more high school graduates into the university.

The reasoning behind the decision is quite obvious. The SU, still paying off the mortgage on SUB, must now start paying \$50,000 a month on that new monument to our corporate importance, HUB. If full time enrollment continues to decline, the SU's revenue will eventually decrease to the point that it can no longer make these payments. Obviously, SU must do its bit to keep "production" up.

That's where the magazine, to be called "A Second Look", comes in. It's clearly designed to plaster over the cracks in the University. Yes, Virginia, this really is center of light and reason. Truth is sitting over there on the shelves of Cameron library. And of course, you won't have any trouble getting a job-- at least, not unless you're a real dummy. As Riskin (the only politician I've ever heard of who combines Richard Nixon's smoothness with Spiro Agnew's mastery of the cliché) put it to the high school presidents this summer, this campus "must always stand for freedom of expression, must always be a home for the idealist, and must always be responsive to the voice of the young."

Council doesn't seem to have considered the possibility that the University might have earned a bad image, that perhaps there are some improvements which should be made. Neither has council realized that declining enrollments might be a good sign. University education is not Morrison's pill. It is not designed to satisfy everyone's needs, nor should it be.

Obviously, I am judging the magazine before it has even appeared, but the philosophy behind a student promotional magazine is at best compacent and at worst deceitful. Council should take a second look at their decision.

Candace Savage

Letters to the editor on any topic are welcome, but they must be signed. Keep them short (about 200 words) unless you wish to make a complex argument. Letters should not exceed 800 words.

The Gateway is published bi-weekly by the students of the University of Alberta. Contents are the responsibility of the editor. Opinions are those of the person who expressed them. Staff this issue included Terri Jackson, editor; Beth Nilsen; Joan Robertson, typesetter; Arthur Savage; Candace Savage, news editor; Michael Schmidt, production manager and thousands of you whom we nurtured in our hearts.

gateway 5