How Am I Doing?

Students at Brigham Young U. get paid to give professors the straight dope on what works — and what doesn't — in the classroom

By PAULA WASLEY

Since the arrival of RateMyProfessors.com, many a faculty member has wished his students would keep their opinions to themselves. At Brigham Young University, however, the university pays undergrads to give professors a piece of their mind.

Each year the university's Students Consulting on Teaching program employs 25 students to observe professors' classroom performance and reflect back to them the view from the students in the seats.

The program began in 1991 as a class project in an education course and proved so popular with both faculty members and students that, a year later, it was adopted universitywide. The program now helps about 80 instructors per year fine-tune their teaching, says D. Lynn Sorenson, its director. The Utah university has about 1,300 full-time faculty members.

At other colleges, the function of observing and evaluating teaching technique is generally left to experienced professionals. But folks at Brigham Young say student observers are less threatening to faculty members than peer evaluators and provide a perspective that even education specialists can't.

"We're experts in what it's like to be a student," says Paul Dixon, a senior who served as the program's student coordinator for the past two years. Many professors, he says, have not been on the receiving end of a lecture for years. "The program answers the question of what it's like to be a student in your class," says Mr. Dixon. "Often the professor finds his or her perception is very different from what it's actually like."

A Student's-Eye View

To set professors straight, the student consultants — known as "Scots" for the program's acronym — offer a range of services designed to give faculty members a student's-eye-view of the classroom. In one option called the "faux student," a consultant takes notes on a lecture as if he were enrolled in the course so the instructor can see what students are retaining. More commonly the student acts as an observer, compiling a blow-by-blow account of everything that happens in a class period — what the professor says and how the class responds, how many students are taking notes, and how many are playing solitaire in the back row.

The student observers can also videotape a lecture. Sometimes the professor will ask them to be on the lookout for specific problems or concerns, such as students not completing reading assignments. The most popular service, says Ms. Sorenson, is having consultants interview the class members about what they like and dislike about the course. Since the university foots the bill for the program, faculty members can receive as much free advice as they want.
For their labor, the students earn around $8.50 an hour for a few hours of work a week. Many like the opportunity to take part in a variety of classes and form closer bonds with faculty members. Mr. Dixon, who is majoring in civil engineering and Spanish translation, was once assigned to observe an art-history course and became so interested in the subject that he participated in class discussions. "You're not normally supposed to do that," he says.

To become a consultant, students must hold a 3.0 grade-point average and attend biweekly training sessions, in which they role-play class dynamics, learn about pedagogical theory, and exchange practical advice on delivering unflattering observations to faculty members. Some students have a tendency to hide their constructive criticism amid too many positive comments, says Ms. Sorenson. "Sometimes the faculty member may miss the meat in the sandwich."

Students rarely evaluate classes in their own fields. That, says Ms. Sorenson, encourages them to concentrate on how the class is being taught, rather than on the content. She once assigned a student to observe an upper-level Russian class. Although he may not have understood what was being said, he had little difficulty picking up on the professor's body language and when students were paying attention.

Ms. Sorensen occasionally receives phone calls from department heads asking her to send consultants to classrooms of faculty members who seem to be having trouble, but the Scots work only at the invitation of the professor. And all work they do remains strictly confidential.

'A Lot Like Therapy'

Scott E. Ferrin, an associate professor of law and education, has used student consultants almost every semester for the past decade. "I can only try to improve a few things at a time," he explains. That's why each semester he invites observers to both his undergraduate and graduate classes; sometimes he has as many as three Scots at a time sitting in on his lectures. While other faculty members may ask the students to observe only a few class sessions, Mr. Ferrin prefers that they attend his course throughout the semester.

Learning from the student requires a thick skin, he says. "You have to be able to deal with the idea that they may actually know something about your teaching that you don't." In the past 10 years, he has tried just about every option the program offers, and the information he has received, he says, has helped him knock some of the rough edges off his teaching.

Consultants have told him that his vocabulary is sometimes too complicated, that he tends to look to the left while lecturing, that he rushes through class discussions without responding to the students' comments. At the suggestion of one consultant, he now outlines his lectures on a whiteboard at the beginning of class so students can see where the class is headed. "It didn't occur to me that students would like that," he says. "I'm a different kind of learner."

For him the most useful thing is to have the consultants interview his students midsemester. That way, he says, he can take stock and adjust his teaching style in time to make a difference, without having to wait till end-of-term evaluations to find out that no one appreciated his jokes or understood his lectures.

Meeting with the Scots is a lot like therapy, says Mr. Ferrin. "It's a reflective, powerful thing," he says. "I come up with the answers myself with them urging it out of me." And, he notes, the benefits aren't all one-sided. A few of his former consultants acquired an interest in education after having sat through so many of his classes, and have in turn asked him for letters of recommendation to graduate school.

Classroom Diagnosis
Rachel E. Crook Lyon, an assistant professor of counseling psychology and special education, began using the SCOT service shortly after her third-year review. Her review committee had told her that while her scholarship was excellent, teaching evaluations showed her students thought that she assigned too much work and that the readings didn't always correspond to her lectures. She brought in a consultant to observe her class and conduct interviews.

He came back with a minute-by-minute timeline of the class session and offered a few simple suggestions based on students' concerns. For instance, he suggested repeating every question twice and waiting for a response. "What was really helpful was seeing how long it takes to do some things," she says, like passing out and collecting quizzes. "I feel like I got a lot of detailed, useful information that I could incorporate to improve my teaching." She even shared some of the student's observations with her class to encourage further discussion.

Ms. Crook Lyon, now in her fifth year at Brigham Young, says she plans to include comments from the consultants in her teaching portfolio for her coming six-year review. She hopes that will help demonstrate to the promotions committee her commitment to teaching and her desire to improve.

This semester Meegan M. Small, a junior, is taking on what amounts to an extra course. A science professor whose students have been performing poorly on tests has enlisted her to attend his lectures and take the quizzes and exams. Ms. Small spends one class session a week taking notes on the lecture material; the other she spends noting what's going on in the classroom.

A few weeks into the semester, Ms. Small, who joined the SCOT program her freshman year, is already nearing a diagnosis: The class lasts an hour and a half, and the professor lectures straight through. The most common error faculty members make, many Scots say, is to stick with just one teaching method. To keep students alert and engaged, they routinely recommend that professors vary their habits by breaking the class into discussion groups, calling on students to answer questions, or even moving to a new corner of the classroom.

Consulting for so many faculty members has changed her perspective on her own classes, says Ms. Small. Sometimes she finds herself noticing who's falling asleep, where the professor is looking, or if anyone's taking notes. It has also made her more empathetic toward her professors. During her freshman year, she struggled in difficult pre-med courses. "I hated all my professors," she says. But after seeing so many wrestle with their own teaching, her attitude changed. "I realized the teacher is just as concerned about me doing well as I am. They want us to succeed."

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