SPCM 2025

Rethinking Course Evaluations: Exposing Gaps and Strengthening Ministry Training at Dallas Theological Seminary

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Purpose of study: Glean information from DTS students to create better course evaluations that assess the course and faculty.

Background of Study: The Educational Assessment Committee (EAC) was tasked in Spring 2025 with updating the course evaluations process.

Research Questions:

Primary RQ:

1. How do students at DTS perceive the purpose of end of semester course evaluations?

Sub-questions:

2. How do students at DTS perceive the relationship between completing end of semester course evaluations and their overall engagement with the institution?
3. What factors motivate DTS students to complete end of semester course evaluations?

Factors Within RQS:

RQ 1: Why do course evaluations exist

- Their perceptions of the overall purpose of course evaluation surveys.
- Their perceptions on questions that would be helpful for improving courses.
- Their perception on how the course evaluation impacts a faculty member.

RQ 2: How do course evaluations impact student engagement

- Their perception of how insights gleaned can help improve student engagement with their institution.
- Categories of engagement include classroom, social engagement, (institutional commitment) a feeling of belonging to DTS, and their own education goals.

RQ 3: Motivation for completion

- Their perception of the modality as a benefit or hindrance to completion.
- Their perception of different modalities utilizing various means of completion (scantron, online, etc.).
- Their perception of timing of taking the course evaluation.
- Their perception of extra credit from faculty or a required assignment.

Research Methods:

Qualitative | 3 Focus Groups were conducted May 2025 Drs. Avery and Yates facilitated | 20 Participants:

Overall Themes:

Theme & Description	Participant Quotes
Perceived Purpose of Course Evaluations: Improvement vs. Formality Students consistently stated that the primary purpose of evaluations is to provide constructive feedback for improving courses and professors. However, some participants questioned whether their feedback leads to real change or is merely a formality.	*"It's to provide enough feedback to continue to improve the course offerings and delivery of the content—not a criticism process in my mind."* (Participant 6, May 14) *"Sometimes it feels trite, like I wonder if this is even gonna make a difference."* (Participant 5, May 14)
Timing and Accessibility Challenges Many participants described logistical hurdles in completing evaluations, such as confusing links, technical issues (especially for non-English interfaces), or the timing of surveys during finals week before courses have fully concluded.	*"I get an email, but the link doesn't take me where it is… I know I want to do this, but it's not a simple click and go."* (Participant 20, May 14) *"It's typically sent during finals week… we haven't finished the class yet. I'd prefer more time after finals to reflect."* (Participant 17, May 28)
Lack of Feedback Loop and Uncertainty of Impact Students expressed frustration over not knowing whether their feedback is read or acted upon. Some reported rare cases where professors changed materials based on evaluations, but most saw little visible impact or communication about results.	*We provide feedback, but there's no communication of results or changes—it feels like writing to the wind."* (Participant 9, May 21) *"Unless I know who's reading it and that it matters, I hold back."* (Participant 15, May 28)
Survey Content is Too General or Limited Multiple participants wanted more targeted, detailed questions about specific aspects of courses (e.g., organization, TA involvement, clarity of assignments, technological quality in online courses) rather than broad, generic prompts.	*"It's four or five very simple questions… I wanted to give more insight but couldn't."* (Participant 2, May 14) *"We need a section for course administration—Canvas errors, syllabus mismatches, GTA responsiveness."* (Participant 9, May 21)
Concerns About Anonymity and Fear of Repercussions Some students worried that professors might see their names attached to critical feedback, potentially influencing grades or future interactions. This fear sometimes caused participants to censor their true opinions.	*"I was hesitant to be blunt because I don't know if it's anonymous and my assignments hadn't been graded yet."* (Participant 5, May 14) *"I held back criticism because I didn't know who was reading it or if it could negatively impact me."* (Participant 15, May 28)
Modality and Engagement Issues (Online vs. Hybrid vs. In-Person) Participants highlighted differences in learning experiences and engagement across modalities. Online students often felt isolated, lacked peer interaction, and faced inconsistent course design and instructor responsiveness compared to in-person classes.	*"When you're fully online, you're an island… unless there's a group assignment, you're doing everything yourself."* (Participant 1, May 14) *"Sometimes I have three professors in a hybrid class and don't know who to evaluate."* (Participant 17, May 28)
Desire for Clearer Communication and Follow-Up Students wanted clarity on several fronts: who reads evaluations, whether professors or administrators respond, and how feedback informs course changes. The lack of transparency diminished motivation to participate.	*"It'd help to know who's reading this and how it affects courses—otherwise, why bother?"* (Participant 16, May 28) *"We need to hear if our input resulted in new initiatives or improvements."* (Participant 9, May 21)