Using self-evaluations to explore HBCU social work statistics students' perceptions of academic preparation and performance

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Abstract: Evaluation is an essential component in social work education. Student evaluations are a useful method to assess student and instructor performance. The study aimed to examine the perceptions of social work students' views on their preparation and performance in a social work statistics course. The study consisted of 113 social work students admitted to the Bachelor of Social Work program at a small Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in a rural community. In this study, a quantitative, descriptive research design was used along with a self-administered student evaluation, and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to describe and analyze social work students' perceptions of their performance and preparation. The results concluded the majority of students (72%) did not meet with their instructor to seek assistance outside of the classroom setting. Approximately, 80% of the students also reported not attending academic tutoring services, however, 58% indicated the need for improvement in their grades.To conclude, despite the reservations which have been expressed about student evaluation, the findings of the study demonstrated that student evaluations can be used as an effective method to provide essential feedback to instructors.

Keywords: student evaluation; preparation; academic performance; instruction

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Introduction

In higher education, student evaluation is often a frequent, yet controversial topic. Much of the research in higher education has focused on student feedback, Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET), and student performance. Essentially, an important objective of higher education is to produce students that can master the content and knowledge of their concentration and are adequately prepared and equipped to enter the workforce. However, there is much debate regarding how to effectively, yet objectively evaluate student preparation, mastery, and performance. A multitude of evaluation methods such as comprehensive paper assignments, quizzes, essays, in-class participation, discussions, case studies, and exams have been used to assess student preparation, mastery, and performance in higher education. It is essential to recognize variables such as timeliness, course load, class size, resources along with validity and reliability may influence the evaluation method which an instructor implements.

The purpose of this study is to examine student self-evaluations collected from a sample of students enrolled in a social work statistics course at a small, rural Historically Black College or University (HBCU). First, a literature review exploring past research of student evaluations is examined. Secondly, the research methodology, design, and results will be provided, followed by the discussion and conclusion of the study.

Student evaluations in higher education

In the early 1990s, universities, and colleges adopted and implemented Total Quality Management (TQM) practices, a practice transitioning the focus of higher education to view students as consumers and later products of the institution (Ivancevich & Ivancevich, 1992; Helms & Keys, 1994; Smith, Zsidisin & Adams, 2004). Viewing students as consumers and or products began to construct a space where variables such a student satisfaction, instructor's teaching abilities, student feedback, and student learning became centralized. Largely, the student as a customer or product

ideology positions instructors as responsible participants accountable for preparing and educating students. As stated by Smith, Zsidisin, and Adams (2004) TQM practices contributed to instructors becoming subordinate to the demands of their students to capitalize on student satisfaction.

In turn, much of higher education has focused on constructing a space in which instructor merit, tenure, and promotion are based highly on student evaluations, while variables such as research and service are also important factors. According to Linse (2017), many institutions use student evaluations as a source for instructional improvement, annual reviews, merit raises, and tenure and promotion. Student evaluations have become a common performance measure used among colleges and universities to make decisions regarding faculty employment and teaching effectiveness (Reinsch et al., 2020). It is worth noting that variables such as teaching, research, and service are weighted differently regarding institutional goal, mission, purpose, population, and reputation. Comparatively, many HBCU's similar to the one studied emphasize the high importance of teaching, thereby positioning student evaluations as a significant determinant of an instructor's tenure or promotion.

Fundamentally, the function of student evaluations is to assist with grade assignments to students and provide useful feedback to students, instructors, and administration (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003). For instance, student evaluations can function as useful tools to measure student and instructor performance. Research has indicated how political and divisive such evaluations can be in higher education. On the other hand, there are different standpoints regarding the validity and reliability of student evaluations.

Jirovec, Ramanathan, and Rosegrant-Alvarez (1998) conducted an empirical study specifically exploring social work students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness. The study collected approximately 5000 student evaluations from 1991 until 1993 from students enrolled in a school of social work at a predominately urban university. While the student evaluation focused on examining the instructor's skills and effectiveness, the study indicated teaching effectiveness was correlated with students' evaluations of the instructor's skills, course organization, building rapport with students, and students' perception of fair grading. Past studies examining social work students' evaluations have provided useful analyses correlating teaching effectiveness with the relationship between the student and instructor (Sola, 1990), and the importance of instructors to inspire creativity, innovation, and critical thinking among students (Lewis, 1991).

Several studies have discredited the use of student evaluation as a useful assessment to measure teaching effectiveness. Particularly, studies within social work continue to question the validity and reliability of student evaluations. Past research indicated social work students appeared to make inaccurate distinctions regarding their instructors along with evaluating instructors from a very emotional state, further impacting how students assess the instructors' teaching effectiveness (Gordon, 1980; Hepworth & Oviatt, 1985). Other variables such as instructor's manipulation, course format, course size, student anonymity, student interest in the course, and course content/subject are also critical variables contributing to outcomes of student evaluation of teaching effectiveness (Hepworth & Oviatt, 1985; Jirovec, Ramanathan & Rosegrant-Alvarez, 1998; Petchers & Chow, 1988; Weinbach, 1988).

Research in other fields of study has also focused on student evaluation. Stimpert and Antonuccio (2003) conducted an empirical study examining a sample of student evaluations of faculty in the Economic and Business Department. Stimpert and Antonucci (2003) concluded variables such as instructors' course objectives, accessibility, gender, and student perceived fairness were correlated to how students perceived the teaching effectiveness of the instructor.

In light of past research contributions to the discussion involving the effectiveness of student evaluations, this empirical study utilized student self-evaluations to primarily focus on students' perceptions of their preparation and academic performance in a social work statistics course. The research question guiding the empirical study was:

> What are the student perceptions of their preparation and academic performance in the social work statistics course?

Research method and design

A quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive research design was adopted for this study to describe and analyze the perceptions of social work students' test preparation and performance in a social work statistics course.

Population and sample selection

The population for the study consisted of 113 social work students. The students were admitted to the Bachelor of Social Work program at the HBCU and enrolled in the social work statistics course. The HBCU consists of a small diverse student population, located in a rural community. The student population was composed of approximately 62% African American, 21% White, 6.5% Hispanic, 2.9% Native American, 1.9% Asian American, and 6.1% other racial and ethnic populations. Females make up 68% of the student body. All participants were adults. Students varied across race, age, and knowledge of statistics.

Data collection instruments

Data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher and guided by the relevant literature review.

Student Self-Midterm Evaluation

The Student Self-Midterm Evaluation is a self-evaluation consisting of 20 questions measuring students' academic performance and academic preparation. The Student Self-Midterm Evaluation consisted of three categories:

category 1 consisted of nine items exploring student's perceptions of their midterm grade and test preparation using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to strongly 5 = disagree);

category 2 consisted of one question approximating the percentage of time spent on academic preparation;

category 3 consisted of 5 open-ended questions exploring student's perceptions for improving their grade.

Data collection

The data was collected during the student's enrolment in the social work statistics course. The researcher arranged a day for students to voluntarily

and anonymously complete the questionnaire after the midterm in the classroom setting. The data was collected during the fall and spring semesters between 2018-2020. No identifying information was collected on the questionnaire. Ethical procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

Data analysis

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 26 data analysis software was used to analyze the descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics were employed with the use of percentage distributions and measures of central tendency. The data from the opened end questions were used to correlate findings to the Likert scale items.

Results

Student Self-Midterm Evaluation

The Student Self-Midterm Evaluation measured each student's perceived academic performance and academic preparation. For the first subsection, there were nine Likert scale items (*1. I am happy with my midterm grade, I have earned it; 2. I spent a lot of time, 2 hours or more per day preparing for the Midterm Exam; 3. I have met with my instructor throughout the semester for extra assistance; 4. I have attended tutoring services throughout the semester; 5. My midterm grade reflects a lack of understanding of the course material; 6. There is much need for me to improve my grade; 7. I have completed and submitted all assignments; 8. I have attended all class sections; 9. I did not fully prepare for the Midterm Exam*) used to measure academic performance and academic preparation (Refer to Table 1). Regarding the item (*I am happy with my midterm grade, I have earned it*) approximately 68% of students indicated agreement, 12% indicated disagreement, and 20% indicated neutrality. Item two (*I spent a lot of time, 2 hours or more per day preparing for the Midterm Exam*) 53% of the students indicated agreement, 31% indicated disagreement, and 16% indicated neutral responses. Item three (*I have met with my instructor throughout the semester for extra assistance*) 20% of students indicated agreement, 72% indicated disagreement, and 8% indicated

neutrality. Item four (*I have attended tutoring services throughout the semester*) 12% of the students indicated agreement, 79% indicated disagreement, and 9% indicated neutral responses. Item five (*My midterm grade reflects a lack of understanding of the course material*) 21% of students indicated agreement, 63% indicated disagreement, and 15% indicated neutrality. Regarding item six (*There is much need for me to improve my grade*) 58% of the students indicated agreement, 27% indicated disagreement, and 14% indicated neutral responses. Item seven (*I have completed and submitted all assignments*) 78% of students indicated agreement, 12% indicated disagreement, and 10% indicated neutrality. For item eight (*I have attended all class sections*) 73% of students indicated agreement, 21% indicated disagreement, and 6% indicated neutrality. For the last item (*I did not fully prepare for the Midterm Exam*) 20% of the students indicated agreement, 66% indicated disagreement, and 15% indicated neutral responses (See Table 1).

Table 1
Student self-midterm evaluation

Item N = 113	Agree %	Disagree %
1. I am happy with my midterm grade; I have earned it.	68	12
2. I spent a lot of time, 2 hours or more per day preparing for the Midterm Exam.	53	31
3. I have met with my instructor throughout the semester for extra assistance.	20	72
4. I have attended tutoring services throughout the semester.	12	79
5. My midterm grade reflects a lack of understanding of the course material.	21	63
6. There is much need for me to improve my grade.	58	27
7. I have completed and submitted all assignments.	78	12
8. I have attended all class sections.	73	21
9. I did not fully prepare for the Midterm Exam.	20	66

Subsection two consisted of the following question *"What percentage of your test preparation was spent in each of these activities?"* The question provided a list of activities *(rereading textbook sections, reviewing homework, solving problems for practice, reviewing notes, and reviewing materials on the course website)* in which students approximated the total percentage (the total amount of time equated to approximately 100%) of time they dedicated to the activities listed above (See Table 2). The majority of students (66%) indicated they spent approximately 10% or less of their time rereading textbook sections. For the next activity, reviewing homework 74% of students indicated they spent 30% or less of their time reviewing homework assignments to prepare for tests and exams. In the third activity, solving problems for practice 80% of students indicated they spent 25% or less of their time solving problems to prepare for exams. The majority of students (76%) indicated they spent approximately 30% or less of their time reviewing their notes for test preparation. Regarding the last activity, reviewing materials on the course website 75% of students indicated they spent 10% or less of their time reviewing materials and resources posted on the course website (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Student test preparation activities

Item	Student Response
N= 113	%
Rereading textbook sections	66
Reviewing homework	74
Solving problems for practice	80
Reviewing notes	76
Reviewing materials on the course website	75

*Note: Question asked, *"What percentage of your test preparation was spent in each of these activities?"*

The final subsection of the questionnaire consisted of the following four open-ended reflection questions: *1. How do you plan to improve your grade this semester?: 2. What can the instructor do to help support your learning and your preparation for the next exam?; 3. What kind of help do you feel you need to improve academically?; and 4. How will your time management differ for the remainder of the semester?* For the open-ended question *"How do you plan to improve your grade this semester?"* Most students indicated they

plan to study more to improve their grades for the semester and balance their time. For the second open-ended question *"What can the instructor do to help support your learning and your preparation for the next exam?"* The majority of student responses indicated the instructor should "remain the same," provide study guides, provide additional examples and quizzes, while others stated they were satisfied with the instructor and material. Regarding the third open-ended question *"What kind of help do you feel you need to improve academically?* Most student responses included studying more would improve their grades academically, they will attend tutoring services, and that they will review the course material. For the fourth open-ended question *"How will your time management differ for the remainder of the semester?"* Most students indicated plans to study more, while others indicated the importance of balancing their time, reviewing chapters, reviewing course materials, and asking questions.

Implications for field education

It is also important to knowledge the implications of student evaluations for field education and practice. As the signature pedagogy for a range of professional education programs including social work, field education is recognized as an essential tool providing theoretical knowledge, skills, and real-world practice experience that students learn in the classroom and translate within field and agency settings (Drolet, 2020; Wayne, Bogo & Raskin, 2010). Field education often consists of improving the professional knowledge, utilization of professional skills, and professional values and ethics of each student. Field education recognizes the interrelated components of curriculum and field and is often evaluated based on criteria by which students demonstrate program competencies (CSWE 2008; Tapp et al., 2012).

Research suggests there is a need for field education to revisit how field education and practice are assessed and evaluated (Ayala et al., 2018; Drolet, 2020). Studies have noted challenges relating to students' experiences in the field, student demand for placements, and the learning needs of the students (McConnell et al., 2013; Ayala et al., 2018). Student evaluations have often been used as an evaluative method to measure student field experience and performance. However, the literature suggests that student evaluations may not be the most effective method

of student learning and field experience (Fortune et al., 2001; Bogo et al., 2002).

In field education, student evaluations may be more useful to identify strategies of improved curriculum, student motivation, and student field learning processes, as opposed to teaching effectiveness, instructor merit, tenure, and promotion. There is a need for alternative evaluation methods to collect more in-depth information about student learning processes, field experiences, and performance, and less focus on students' satisfaction with field instructors and placements (Borch, Sandvoll, & Risor, 2020). Evaluative methods that encourage dialogue and reflection among field instructors and students can be useful in providing context and field-specific feedback (Steyn et al, 2019; Darwin, 2017). Furthermore, the development of evaluative methods that provide students the opportunity to provide feedback on their learning processes can be valuable tools to faculty, administrators, and students in the field and educational settings. Such feedback will allow instructors the opportunity to reflect on student field experiences, learning outcomes, competencies, and field activities. It is vital to design new alternative evaluative methods in field education that are intended for educational improvement and student learning outcomes.

Discussion and conclusions

There is still much research that questions the validity and reliability of student evaluations in higher education. However, within higher education teaching quality, instructor merit, tenure, and promotion areheavily reliant on student evaluations (Stroebe, 2020). In turn, faculty may experience increased pressure to receive positive student evaluations and higher evaluation scores. Studies show that faculty are likely to decrease course content, lower course standards, and engage in grade leniency to improve their student evaluations (Birnbaum, 2000; Stroebe, 2020).

Traditionally, student evaluations are the most utilized and reliable tool in higher education that provides instructor evaluation and feedback. Student evaluations provide instructors with feedback that can be useful to instruction, preparation, planning, and understanding their classroom environment. Student feedback can play a vital role in increasing student enthusiasm and participation. Within field education, student evaluations

can be useful to assess student motivation, mastery of competencies, and performance. Hence, it is important to develop evaluative methods that assess student learning for both curriculum and field experiences. Evaluative methods should consider the students' knowledge, skills, learning processes, and growth, which are all fundamental to one's education and field experience. A comprehensive evaluation plan should establish a clear connection between curriculum, course content, program goals, and field learning experiences.

Although student evaluations can be useful tools providing instructors with feedback, it is important to note that the Student Self-Midterm Evaluation in this study assessed students' perceptions of instruction and test preparation, not actual teaching effectiveness. Studies have discussed faculty concerns with student evaluation ratings which can be influenced by faculty or course popularity, course level of difficulty, course subject, and student's overall grade (Moore, 2006; Barth, 2008; Constand & Pace, 2014). Additionally, students do not possess the knowledge and competency to assess factors involving course design such as course methods, assessments, and objectives. On the other hand, the findings of the study demonstrated the value that student evaluations provide in the terms of student perceptions and preparation.

In addition to student evaluations, it is valuable to begin to think about the integration of other alternatives such as student interviews, peer visitation, learning outcomes, alumni surveys as possible sources of feedback and evaluation. Faculty portfolios and peer teaching evaluations are other useful methods used in higher education to provide feedback for instruction and teaching.

Taking the findings into consideration, the author highlights the need for future research to explore the usefulness of student evaluations within HBCU settings. There is a need for research to examine how various factors such as race, gender, and the likeability of an instructor have on a students' perception and evaluation (Stroebe, 2020). Research demonstrates factors such as instructors' physical attractiveness has been associated with influencing students' evaluations of their instructors (Stroebe, 2020; Murray & Zdravkovic, 2016). Given the widespread use of student evaluations in higher education, it is valuable to begin to clarify the intended purpose and effectiveness of student evaluation and data. Research suggests that student evaluations are often used in higher education as tools assessing students' perceptions relating to their instructor, and usually do not provide useful data for course improvement and student learning (Linse, 2017).

Faculty and administration should be encouraged to rethink and redefine student evaluations in ways that can be transformative to field education, student learning, and curriculum design. It is essential for faculty and administration to have access to student evaluation data and empirical-based information to inform their interpretation and decision-making processes. Empirical and research-based information plays a vital role in constructing supportive and empowering academic spaces in higher education for faculty to participate in open dialogue and feedback regarding student perceptions and evaluations.

As higher education institutions continue to employ student evaluations for evaluative methods it is critical to begin noting the difference between students, the *producers* of student evaluation data, and faculty and administrators, the *users* of the data. The effective development and appropriate use of student evaluation data within higher education are fundamental to establishing quality teaching, innovative curriculum design, and improved student learning outcomes. An informed understanding of student evaluations can contribute to the creation of a transformative academic community that fosters student learning and appreciates faculty.

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