



2004

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## Recommended Citation

Fischer, Judith D. (2004) "How to Improve Student Ratings in Legal Writing Courses: Views from the Trenches," *University of Baltimore Law Review*: Vol. 34: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.law.ubalt.edu/ublr/vol34/iss2/3>

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## HOW TO IMPROVE STUDENT RATINGS IN LEGAL WRITING COURSES: VIEWS FROM THE TRENCHES

Judith D. Fischer†

New legal writing professors quickly learn that the student ratings (or student evaluations<sup>1</sup>) that students complete at the end of a course have a great deal of influence in some law schools.<sup>2</sup> Administrators and faculties often consult student ratings when making personnel decisions, and the ratings may affect the amount of a professor's raise or even whether the professor is retained or promoted.<sup>3</sup> As a result, figuring out how to get good ratings may be crucial to the law teacher's career.<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite working hard and caring deeply about the students' success, the new writing professor may receive rating forms that contain dishearteningly negative comments and leave him or her questioning how to get better ones the next time. This article responds to that concern by presenting some advice from the trenches. To collect it, I surveyed members of the Association of Legal Writing Directors ("ALWD"). Members of ALWD are experienced law school teachers, and most have additional perspective obtained by reviewing the student rating forms of those they supervise. My purpose was to report their wisdom and insights for the benefit of others in the field of legal

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1. While the forms students complete to rate their instructors are sometimes called *student evaluations*, the phrase *student ratings* is more exact and has been adopted by most researchers in the field. They reason that the ratings are simply data to be interpreted by evaluators. WILLIAM E. CASHIN, IDEA PAPER NO. 20: STUDENT RATINGS OF TEACHING: A SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH (1988), available at <http://www.idea.ksu.edu> (last visited Oct. 21, 2004).
2. See Richard L. Abel, *Evaluating Evaluations: How Should Law Schools Judge Teaching?*, 40 J. LEGAL EDUC. 407, 407, 454 (1990).
3. See Marina Angel, *Women in Legal Education: What It's Like to Be Part of a Perpetual First Wave or the Case of the Disappearing Women*, 61 TEMP. L. REV. 799, 832 (1988) (explaining how law faculties use student ratings for personnel decisions).
4. See, e.g., Kathleen E. McKone, *Analysis of Student Feedback Improves Instructor Effectiveness*, 23 J. MGMT. EDUC. 396, 407 (1999) (stating that although some might argue that improving ratings should not be professors' primary goal, "ratings are important to tenure and promotion and are an indicator of faculty teaching performance").

writing. Part I of this article presents some background from the literature on student ratings. Part II presents the ALWD members' advice on how a writing professor can obtain better student ratings.

## I. BACKGROUND—VIEWPOINTS FROM THE LITERATURE

Some scholars have concluded that student ratings are accorded too much weight.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, their influence has been strong enough to prompt more than two thousand articles on the subject.<sup>6</sup> This voluminous literature, the vast majority of which covers student ratings in the undergraduate setting, offers a variety of advice for improving them, some of it serious and some tongue-in-cheek or even cynical.

The serious suggestions often coincide with experts' advice about teaching effectively. Students have been shown to value the following traits as important in an instructor: 1) presenting the material in an interesting way that stimulates intellectual curiosity, 2) encouraging learning through "empathy, interaction with, and concern for students," 3) organizing and presenting material clearly, and 4) treating the students fairly.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have stated that essentially the same traits influence student ratings. One scholar, for example, listed these key influences on student ratings: 1) clarity and impact of presentation, which includes organization and enthusiasm, and 2) the "quality of interpersonal relationships between instructor and students," which includes expressiveness, rapport, and respect for the students.<sup>8</sup>

What about the new legal writing teacher who works hard at incorporating the above advice but still receives disappointing ratings? Interestingly, research suggests that good teaching and good student

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5. See, e.g., Robert W. Weinbach, *Manipulations of Student Evaluations: No Laughing Matter*, 24 J. SOC. WORK EDUC. 27, 27, 34 (1988) (reporting a "serious question" about student ratings validity and arguing that their data should be viewed as "one rather suspect component of a total package of evaluation input"); Judith D. Fischer, *The Use and Effects of Student Ratings in Legal Writing Courses: A Plea for Holistic Evaluation of Teaching*, 10 LEGAL WRITING 111 (forthcoming 2005) (reporting scholars' assessments of the negative effects of student ratings). Even researchers who defend student ratings as valid and reliable agree that they should not be the sole source of information about an instructor's teaching. See Herbert W. Marsh, *Students' Evaluations of University Teaching: Dimensionality, Reliability, Validity, Potential Biases, and Utility*, 76 J. EDUC. PSYCHOL. 707, 729 (1984) (stating that "[n]early all researchers argue strongly that it is absolutely necessary to have multiple indicators of effective teaching whenever the evaluation of teaching effectiveness is to be used for personnel/tenure decisions").
  6. See Robin Wilson, *New Research Casts Doubt on Value of Student Evaluations of Professors*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC., Jan. 16, 1998, at A12.
  7. THOMAS A. ANGELO & K. PATRICIA CROSS, *CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES: A HANDBOOK FOR COLLEGE TEACHERS* 318 (2d ed. 1993).
  8. JOSEPH LOWMAN, *MASTERING THE TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING* 19 (2d ed. 1995). See also JOHN A. CENTRA, *REFLECTIVE FACULTY EVALUATION: ENHANCING TEACHING AND DETERMINING FACULTY EFFECTIVENESS* 63 (1993) (stating that highly rated teachers display enthusiasm, establish rapport with the students, and present material clearly).

ratings are not necessarily coextensive.<sup>9</sup> And the new teacher should be aware that special issues affect student ratings in the field of legal writing, where features of the course have been identified in studies and anecdotal reports as affecting student perceptions of their professors' work.

There are two reported studies of student ratings in legal writing courses. The first showed that legal writing teachers tend to receive lower ratings for that course than for others they teach, a result that the writer theorized may be due to the workload of the writing course and the critiques given throughout the semester.<sup>10</sup> The second study<sup>11</sup> was based on data from the ALWD survey that is the subject of this article. It reported some ALWD members' belief that the ratings are affected by traits of the course, including grading during the semester, critiques of writing, and the course workload.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these studies, there are numerous anecdotal reports of issues specific to the legal writing course. For example, one writing professor wrote that the course's difficulty and students' reactions to disappointing grades during the semester lead some students to direct anger at their writing professors.<sup>13</sup> Another concluded that the "very nature of the course" can lead to student complaints and make the teacher "the most hated member of the first-year faculty."<sup>14</sup> Others have made similar observations.<sup>15</sup>

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9. See, e.g., VALEN E. JOHNSON, *GRADE INFLATION: A CRISIS IN COLLEGE EDUCATION* 160-61 (2003) (reporting a large study in which students rated teachers along a spectrum that correlated with their expected grades even when they were in the same class and thus received the same teaching); Richard John Stapleton & Gene Murkison, *Optimizing the Fairness of Student Evaluations: A Study of Correlations Between Instructor Excellence, Study Production, Learning Production, and Expected Grades*, 25 J. MGMT. EDUC. 269, 279-84 (2001) (reporting a study showing that, of twenty-nine instructors, four who received student ratings in the top half produced learning in the bottom half, and four who received ratings in the bottom half produced learning in the top half).
  10. Melissa Marlow-Shafer, *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance and the "Legal Writing Pathology": Diagnosis Confirmed*, 5 N.Y. CITY L. REV. 115, 126, 130-31 (2002).
  11. Fischer, *supra* note 5.
  12. *Id.*
  13. Peter Brandon Bayer, *A Plea for Rationality and Decency: The Disparate Treatment of Legal Writing Faculties as a Violation of Both Equal Protection and Professional Ethics*, 39 DUQ. L. REV. 329, 363-64 (2001).
  14. Ilhyung Lee, *The Rookie Season*, 39 SANTA CLARA L. REV. 473, 484-85 (1999).
  15. See, e.g., Maureen Arrigo-Ward, *How to Please Most of the People Most of the Time: Directing (Or Teaching In) a First-Year Legal Writing Program*, 29 VAL. U. L. REV. 557, 559 (1995) (stating that the writing course "generates student anxiety sooner and more intensely than other courses," and that this anxiety often "pours onto" the professor); Jan Levine, *Response: "You Can't Please Everyone, So You'd Better Please Yourself": Directing (Or Teaching In) a First-Year Legal Writing Program*, 29 VAL. U. L. REV. 611, 615-16 (1995) (stating that the time students must spend on the writing course and the detailed critiques of writing generate student anxiety and complaints); Barbara Busharis, *Tips*

These sources suggest that, in addition to suggestions about good teaching, ratings-specific advice can be helpful. One such suggestion that recurs in the literature is for the instructor to obtain written midterm feedback. Student-ratings scholars agree that instructors who receive feedback during the course tend to receive higher end-of-course student ratings.<sup>16</sup> The feedback need not be elaborate. The professor can distribute a simple form containing two questions: 1) What is working well for you in this course? and 2) Is there anything you would like to see changed?<sup>17</sup>

Timing has also been found to affect student ratings, which tend to be lower if they are collected after students have received grades.<sup>18</sup> Here the new legal writing teacher will recognize an issue specific to the legal writing course: students in the course typically receive grades during the semester, in contrast to other law school courses.<sup>19</sup> The respondents to the survey discussed here have offered suggestions to partially ameliorate this effect.<sup>20</sup>

Ratings-specific advice can also take a more cynical tone. Several scholars have advised those seeking higher ratings to inflate grades<sup>21</sup>

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*for New Teachers: Learning From Your First Student Evaluations*, 16 SECOND DRAFT: BULLETIN OF THE LEGAL WRITING INSTITUTE 21, 21 (2002), available at <http://www.lwionline.org/publications/seconddraft/May 02.pdf> (last visited Oct. 21, 2004) (stating that anecdotal evidence suggests that legal writing faculty members are "more harshly evaluated than other faculty members").

16. WILBERT J. MCKEACHIE, *MCKEACHIE'S TEACHING TIPS* 277-78 (Houghton Mifflin Co. 1999); Peter A. Cohen, *Effectiveness of Student-Rating Feedback for Improving College Instruction: A Meta-Analysis of Findings*, 13 RES. IN HIGHER EDUC. 321, 332 (1980); James A. Kulik, *Student Ratings: Validity, Utility, and Controversy*, 109 NEW DIRECTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL RES. 9, 15-16 (2001).
17. Law professor William Roth has published a form containing two longer questions to be used for midterm feedback. William Roth, *Student Evaluation of Law Teaching*, 17 AKRON L. REV. 609, 625, app. C (1984).
18. See David D. Walter, *Student Evaluations—A Tool for Advancing Law Teacher Professionalism and Respect for Students*, 6 LEGAL WRITING 177, 189 (2000) (stating that teachers who give grades throughout the semester "are at risk of lower evaluations from students disappointed with their grades"); Howard K. Wachtel, *Student Evaluation of College Teaching Effectiveness: A Brief Review*, 23 ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUC. 191, 201 (1998) (stating that "the consensus is definitely that there is a moderate positive correlation between expected grade and student ratings").
19. See Lee, *supra* note 14, at 482 n.31 (explaining that in the legal writing course, grades are given throughout the semester, which aroused some ire in his students); Marlow-Shafer, *supra* note 10, at 126, 130-31 (theorizing that the critiques given throughout the semester negatively affect student ratings in the legal writing course).
20. See *infra* notes 37-38 and accompanying text.
21. See, e.g., Ian Neath, *How to Improve Your Teaching Evaluations Without Improving Your Teaching*, 78 PSYCHOL. REP. 1363, 1365 (1996) (advising professors who wish to improve their student ratings to "grade leniently"); Weinbach, *supra* note 5, at 32 (advising professors to "curve exams that generate less than seventy percent 'A's'"); Paul Trout, *How to Improve Your Teaching Evaluation Scores Without Improving Your Teaching!*, 7 MONT. PROFESSOR 17, 19

or decrease course rigor.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the grade the student expects when completing the rating form has been found to affect student ratings.<sup>23</sup> Research on course rigor is more mixed, with some researchers concluding that rigor leads to lower ratings<sup>24</sup> and others concluding that students rate rigorous courses favorably.<sup>25</sup> But it is a common belief among university professors that lowering course standards may improve student ratings.<sup>26</sup> Another cynical suggestion, to “Be Male,” is based on data indicating that women professors tend to receive lower student ratings.<sup>27</sup>

Other writers bluntly suggest pandering to students. “Imply to the class that they are a group of geniuses,” counsels one.<sup>28</sup> “Throw a

(1997), available at <http://mtprof.msun.edu/Fall1997/HOWTORAL.HTML> (last visited Feb. 11, 2005) (advising professors to “Give lots of high grades!”).

22. See, e.g., Arthur M. Sullivan & Graham R. Skanes, *Validity of Student Evaluation of Teaching and the Characteristics of Successful Instructors*, 66 J. EDUC. PSYCHOL. 584, 588 (1974) (reporting a study in which instructors’ task orientation and high expectations produced low student ratings but high achievement); Trout, *supra* note 21, at 6-7 (arguing that “lenient standards promote favorable ratings”); Weinbach, *supra* note 5, at 32-33 (mentioning several ways to lower rigor in order to obtain higher student ratings).
23. See JOHNSON, *supra* note 9, at 81-82.
24. E.g., Stapleton & Murkison, *supra* note 9, at 280-81 (reporting a study in which teachers who assigned more work received lower student ratings).
25. E.g., WILLIAM E. CASHIN, IDEA PAPER NO. 32: STUDENT RATINGS OF TEACHING: THE RESEARCH REVISITED 6 (1995), available at <http://www.idea.ksu.edu> (last visited Oct. 21, 2004) [hereinafter CASHIN, IDEA PAPER NO. 32] (stating that studies show students give higher ratings to courses that require hard work).
26. See, e.g., PETER SACKS, GENERATION X GOES TO COLLEGE: AN EYE-OPENING ACCOUNT OF TEACHING IN POSTMODERN AMERICA 99-102 (1996) (reporting that his student ratings increased when he lowered standards in his undergraduate writing course); Richard S. Markovits, *The Professional Assessment of Legal Academics: On the Shift from Evaluator Judgment to Market Evaluations*, 48 J. LEGAL EDUC. 417, 427 (1998) (reporting that some law teachers lower standards “in pedagogically unjustified ways to secure better ratings”); Michael H. Birnbaum, *A Survey of Faculty Opinions Concerning Student Evaluations of Teaching*, THE SENATE FORUM, Fall 1999, at 19, 20, available at <http://psych.fullerton.edu/mbirnbaum/faculty3.htm> (last visited Oct. 2, 2004) (reporting a survey of faculty members at California State University, Fullerton, in which seventy-two percent said student ratings encouraged them to “water down” course content).
27. Neath, *supra* note 21, at 1364; see also Joan M. Krauskopf, *Touching the Elephant: Perceptions of Gender Issues in Nine Law Schools*, 44 J. LEGAL EDUC. 311, 326-27 (1994) (reporting a study of nine law schools in which 48% of the women and 18% of the men believed that women professors had a heavier burden than men to prove themselves competent to students). But see CASHIN, IDEA PAPER NO. 32, *supra* note 25, at 4 (stating that, of fourteen studies reviewed, the majority found no difference between ratings of male and female instructors, while a few found males received higher ratings, but that a review of different studies revealed a “very slight average difference in favor of women”).
28. Weinbach, *supra* note 5, at 31.

party for them!" writes another.<sup>29</sup> Other hints are to teach higher-level classes and to avoid required courses,<sup>30</sup> both of which are based on sound research findings.<sup>31</sup> These last two hints highlight the special difficulties about student ratings in the legal writing course, which is both entry-level and required.

## II. ADVICE FROM THE TRENCHES

### A. *The Survey*

To obtain the insights of ALWD members on improving student ratings in legal writing courses, in the spring of 2002 I sent them a survey by e-mail through the organization's listserv. The survey defined "legal writing course" as a "first-year law school course of which legal writing is a significant component." The survey contained a variety of questions about the use and effects of student ratings in legal writing courses, and some of its data have been reported elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> This article focuses on the survey items that dealt with improving student ratings.

Fifty-two of the approximately two hundred ALWD members on the listserv returned the survey form, for a response rate of about 26%. Their fifty law schools<sup>33</sup> represent all sections of the country. All of the respondents had at least two years of experience in the legal writing field. Because the respondents were self-selected, their responses are not necessarily representative of the entire ALWD membership. But they are valuable as insights from seasoned professionals in the field.

### B. *The Questions*

This article reports the respondents' answers to two survey items. One asked, "What advice would you give a new legal writing teacher on how to get good results on student evaluation forms?" Respondents could make as many suggestions as they wished in response to this open-ended question, and forty-one generously offered a range of suggestions. Another question invited comments on whether and how student evaluations had helped the respondents improve their own teaching. Thirty-nine respondents offered responsive comments, some of which are reported here because they may be helpful to those seeking information on improving student ratings.

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29. Trout, *supra* note 21.

30. Neath, *supra* note 21, at 1367.

31. See, e.g., CASHIN, IDEA PAPER NO. 32, *supra* note 25, at 5-6.

32. See Fischer, *supra* note 5.

33. Two schools are represented twice, which is possible because ALWD has multiple members from some schools that have coequal writing professors instead of directors.

### C. *The Respondents' Advice*

The survey responses included some suggestions about improving teaching, some suggestions tailored to the ratings themselves, and a sprinkling of cynical comments.

#### 1. Advice About Improving Teaching

The ALWD members' most common suggestion fits within the category of improving teaching: Be prepared for class. Nine respondents stressed the importance of preparation. Three others expressed a similar thought that was probably implicit for others: "Master the material" and "Show the students that you have substance to deliver." Five others gave more general prompts toward excellence, such as "Be the best teacher you can be" or "Be a great teacher."

Another suggestion that related to good teaching concerned clarity of presentation. Five respondents mentioned the importance of making course goals clear to the students or having clear lesson plans. Several respondents offered related advice: "Be responsive to student questions," said one, and another cautioned teachers not to "play hide the ball" too much. Along these lines, another professor explained how she became more explicit in answering student questions over time. Experience showed her that "students tend to make things hard enough for themselves and that I can answer more questions without worrying about giving away too much information or giving anyone an unfair advantage."

Several respondents offered suggestions about rigor. "Expect excellence," said one experienced teacher, while another advised teachers to "Challenge students." "Let them know you are serious and have high standards," wrote another.

##### a. *Relating to the Students*

Another category of common suggestions centered around the instructor's relationship with the students. Seven respondents mentioned the importance of respecting the students, with two stressing that this must be done both in and out of class. Seven also emphasized caring about the students. "An essential ingredient in getting higher evaluations," said one, "is successfully conveying to the students that you care about their learning." In years when she successfully did that, she said, she received higher ratings than in other years.

A related suggestion is to "get to know *each* student and give helpful one-on-one feedback *before* time for evaluations!" Another professor wrote, "Listen to any suggestions. I have learned that if students have a complaint, there is usually some validity to it." Other advice was to "Recognize the students' strengths and use them if possible."

Five respondents stressed the importance of simply being accessible. One advised, "Be available to students. Keep your office door

open, and don't limit visits to 'office hours.' Answer e-mails and newsgroup questions promptly." Another respondent provided this suggestion about relating to students: "Students have to trust that you know what you're doing, that you'll treat them fairly, that you'll get them where they need to be, and that you'll be honest with them at all times."

Other respondents see the writing instructor's role as akin to that of a cheerleader or a coach. One said, "Make your students feel confident that if they take the course seriously, they will develop strong analytical and communication skills." Another wrote, "View your role as a coach helping students to become more effective thinkers and writers."

Table

Suggestion	Number
Be prepared for class	9
Respect the students	7
Care about the students	7
Don't think about the ratings/ be yourself	6
Explain topics and expectations clearly	5
Be accessible to the students	5
Return marked papers in a timely manner	4

**Most common suggestions for improving student ratings (N = 41)**  
(Respondents could make more than one suggestion)

*b. Being Yourself*

But if showing that the teacher cares is one side of the coin, maintaining the teacher's integrity is the other. Several respondents emphasized this. "Don't even try [to improve ratings]—just be yourself," wrote one, while others wrote, "Don't lose your sense of yourself as a teacher," and "Don't think about [the ratings]." Similar suggestions are to "be firm about decisions," to remember that "you're in charge," and "Do not second-guess yourself or respond defensively." At the same time, it's important to "own your mistakes" to the class. As one respondent counseled, "Be prepared, confident, and knowledgeable. If students smell fear or insecurity, they will strike!" It may be difficult for the beginning teacher to strike an appropriate balance between reaching out to the students and maintaining integrity, but these seasoned professionals suggest that the beginner should aim toward that goal.

c. *Marking Papers and Conducting Conferences*

Marking student papers was the subject of several comments.<sup>34</sup> An important point mentioned by four respondents is to mark and return the papers promptly. Concerning the marking process, one respondent advised professors to “give comprehensive, well-organized, readable comments on student papers.” Two mentioned the importance of including some positive comments in the critique, with one suggesting, “[S]tart out with the positive and end with the positive.” Another professor, however, concluded that she had been too concerned about maintaining a positive tone. Some of her students wrote comments like these on their rating forms: “You don’t have to sugar coat everything,” and “You don’t have to say something nice before you tell me I’ve done something wrong.” Based on the handwriting, she thinks many of these comments came from men. She concluded that law students are a “tough group” who may respond to varied approaches. Now she asks students whether they want her to “sugar coat” her comments or use a “no holds barred” approach. They usually choose the latter, and she reports that following this approach has improved her student ratings.

Other respondents mentioned student conferences. One recommended active listening during conferences, while another urged professors to “conduct long individual conferences.” Yet another suggested reading published material on conducting effective conferences.<sup>35</sup>

d. *Injecting Lightness and Humor*

A few mentioned injecting some lightness into the course: “Laugh when you can (but only with people—never at them),” said one. Another counseled, “Make it as fun as you can, without pulling your punches.”

e. *Connecting with the Professional Community*

Several other respondents mentioned the importance of connecting with other legal writing teachers. One wrote simply, “Talk to other teachers.” Another suggested reading published material on critiquing papers and conducting effective student conferences.

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34. See Anne Enquist, *Critiquing and Evaluating Law Students’ Writing: Advice from Thirty-Five Experts*, 22 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 1119, 1119 (1999); Anne Enquist, *Critiquing Law Students’ Writing: What the Students Say Is Effective*, 2 LEGAL WRITING 145, 145 (1996) (reporting the author’s research about effectively critiquing student papers in legal writing courses).

35. For a discussion of techniques for conducting effective student conferences, see Robin S. Wellford-Slocum, *The Law School Student-Faculty Conference: Towards a Transformative Learning Experience*, 45 S. TEX. L. REV. 255 (2004).

## 2. Ratings-Specific Advice

Other advice was aimed more directly at the student ratings. One factor known to affect student ratings, but not necessarily student learning, is the teacher's enthusiasm,<sup>36</sup> and three respondents counseled professors to adopt that trait. One of them urged, "Be upbeat and excited about your teaching."

Four respondents advised professors not to give grades before the rating forms are completed<sup>37</sup> because, as one said, resentment about poor grades "shows up on evaluations."<sup>38</sup> Another respondent advised instructors to administer the forms "at a time and in a setting when [the students are] in a good mood (i.e., after their last papers are in, and along with coffee and pastries or soda and pizza might not be a bad idea either)."

One suggestion for defusing problems peculiar to the legal writing course is for the professor to lay some groundwork before introducing unpopular topics. This process may start on the first days of class when the professor conveys the importance of the legal writing to the practice of law. It can continue throughout the course as the professor anticipates and responds to complaints about unpopular components like citation rules and the course workload. One respondent called this "inoculation," and said it results in fewer complaints because "I've already voiced the complaints and told [the students] why such complaints are 'not persuasive.'" Another wrote, "I have found that, when students are clearly informed of the reasons underlying course methodology, writing 'rules,' etc., their resistance melts away—particularly when I can get students involved in classroom discussion so they can see, independently, why certain rules work well." Another professor suggested introducing unpopular topics with language like this: "I know citations seem useless but . . . ." A professor can also inoculate against negative reactions to grades by helping the students to "put the grades and feedback they receive in perspective."

Several respondents offered advice about pleasing the students. One cautioned that teachers should avoid giving extra work that does

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36. JOHNSON, *supra* note 9, at 164-65 (stating that studies have shown that instructor expressiveness biases student ratings); Sullivan & Skanes, *supra* note 22, at 589 (reporting that professors who focused on achievement rather than projecting enthusiasm received lower student ratings but produced students who learned more and did better in advanced courses); Wendy M. Williams & Stephen J. Ceci, *How'm I Doing?: Problems with Student Ratings of Instructors and Courses*, CHANGE, Sep./Oct. 1997, 13, 22 (reporting that a change in one instructor's expressiveness had a substantial impact on student ratings but a small impact on student achievement as measured by examination scores).

37. See also Levine, *supra* note 15, at 617 (explaining that the author avoids some problems in the legal writing course by commenting on early papers but grading only the final project of the semester).

38. See JOHNSON, *supra* note 9, at 52-57 tbl.1, 63-68 tbl.2 (summarizing studies about the effect of grades on student ratings).

not appear on the syllabus. Another bluntly said, "Be careful not to piss off the students." In a similar vein, another wrote, "Walk a fine line. Don't be too hard or too easy. Try never to directly challenge a student." Another said the "cynic" in her prompts the following advice: "Don't challenge students for being absent or unprepared or missing a deadline or playing solitaire on their laptops in class. Be their 'friend' more than their teacher." These suggestions are consistent with some analyses of contemporary students, members of "Generation X," who are said to view formal education more as a means of obtaining a credential than as a forum for learning.<sup>39</sup> This situation challenges the conscientious professor to find a balance between appropriate adjustments to student needs and giving in to student demands at the expense of their learning.

### 3. Putting the Ratings in Perspective

Finally, the professor must learn to put student ratings feedback in perspective. Most professors receive discouraging comments from time to time. One experienced director advised that reading the student ratings can be a disheartening experience: "I set aside one day each summer on which I do no other work," he wrote. "Reading the evaluations is one of the most painful things I do. I seem to take the positive ones for granted; the negatives strike deep." Another experienced director urged new writing teachers to do their best while realizing that "you cannot please everyone, so don't try, and don't be discouraged by negative comments. Learn from the helpful comments and put the rest away."

## III. CONCLUSION

Not surprisingly, the survey respondents were not in total agreement about how a legal writing professor can achieve better student ratings. But considered together, their responses suggest that getting good ratings is both a science and an art. The science involves knowing the subject matter, preparing thoroughly for class, conducting effective student conferences, and carefully marking student papers. The art involves finding balances between being responsive to students and being oneself, and between giving students needed help and maintaining appropriate rigor.

The survey responses also suggest that the professor should be mindful of the quirks of student ratings. The new legal writing professor should be aware of well-documented influences on the ratings like

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39. SACKS, *supra* note 26, at 124 (defining Generation X as the generation born between 1965 and 1980). See also Helen A. Anderson, *Generation X Goes to Law School: Are We Too Nice to Our Students?*, 10 PERSP: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 73, 73 (2002) (describing Generation X students' desire for "ever increasing amounts of hand-holding").

expected grades<sup>40</sup> and the professor's enthusiasm.<sup>41</sup> The respondents also advise that some issues specific to the legal writing course, like unpopular topics and early grades, can be addressed by helping students put those matters in perspective. And when the new professor receives the rating forms, he or she should be aware that they sometimes contain strongly negative comments, so it may be best to read them at a time when the negatives can be absorbed without the intrusion of other pressing matters. If there are negative comments, familiarity with this survey's results and with the literature on the subject may help the new professor respond to administrators' concerns.

All of this may seem challenging, but the respondents suggest that the new professor can learn from the challenge while making a difference in students' professional development. As one respondent said: "Enjoy your job—it's important and fulfilling."

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40. See JOHNSON, *supra* note 9, at 81-82.

41. See *supra* note 36 and accompanying text.