

Welcome to Column 22 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/page.php?ss=26>

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HEY JANE!

I am preparing for my 3rd year review and am wondering how to best address negative student course evaluations in my statement. I'm particularly concerned that some comments seem to be a reflection of the student's perception of my personal characteristics and feminist teaching style rather than a reflection of how much they have learned during the semester. Help!

JANE SAYS:

The first and most important piece of advice is: don't be defensive in the framing of your teaching evaluations. Instead, think of this as an opportunity to outline how you plan to improve. Hopefully there will be at least one item or aspect of teaching for which you have scored well. Start by pointing that out. Then, for items where your scores were not as high as you would have liked, be prepared to outline a specific plan for improving those scores. Your plan might involve visiting your institution's teaching resource center, subscribing to a teaching journal, or attending a teaching workshop at an ASA or SWS meeting. Your plan might be even more concrete, such that you propose a curriculum change or altering a current classroom practice. By outlining your plan for improvement, when it's time for your next review, hopefully you'll be able to narrate a success story. For a specific example, the excerpt below comes from my 4th year review statement:

On the overall evaluation item, the range of my scores changed from 3.4-3.9 for my 2nd year review to 3.6-4.6 with 4 out of 9 classes being above a 4 since the last review. In the past I have been concerned with the evaluation items that purport to measure "points of view other than own," "encouraged and responded to questions" and "respect for students." I have always done very well in these areas. The last two years, I have focused on improving my evaluations on the items that claim to measure "lectures consistent with objectives," "exam questions correspond with class material," "unbiased grading," and "informed class of grading criteria." Since I have been focusing on these items, my scores have been consistently high, ranging from 3.7 to 5.0 with most falling above a 4.0. In the spirit of encouraging students to "claim their education," rather than passively receive it, I have started asking introductory students at the beginning of the semester to articulate what expectations they have of their professors. This usually leads to lively discussion. In addition to helping the students formulate and articulate their expectations, this exercise helps me know what their expectations are at the beginning of class rather than waiting until the end of the course to see if I've lived up to those silent expectations.

It can also be useful to give some context to the evaluations. One of my evaluators put it nicely by writing:

The committee notes that "Jane" teaches courses on deviance, crime, gender and health – courses that tackle issues of contemporary moral and political concern and in doing so raise the hackles of some students. One of Professor "Jane's" goals is to present students with a wide range of views on course topics. Her success in meeting this goal may be seen in some comments written by students. For example, Professor "Jane" is simultaneously too much of a feminist and not enough of a feminist. Course content has a liberal spin and is even handed. The committee reads these

assessments as an indication that “Jane” is doing a good job of presenting a reasonably balanced perspective on topics covered in her courses.

You don’t have much control over how your evaluators frame your evaluations, so you need to give context yourself. Once again, let me emphasize that this shouldn’t take on a tone of defensiveness. If your evaluations indicate that students felt the course was too hard, or they didn’t understand what you wanted from them, or they have never been asked to think about these issues before, turn that around ask why they felt that way. There are several ways to do this that demonstrate you care about the negative evaluations and are working to do something about it. For example, you can develop your own assessment questionnaire that asks students about their prior experience with certain types of assignments, pedagogy, or using certain skills, as well as the extent to which certain assignments or materials helped them to develop new skills and knowledge. This can be very useful because 1) it allows you to provide a meaningful context for their dissatisfaction. If they found the reading too difficult, having information about how often they have been asked to read journal articles in other courses, or if they know how to outline a reading can allow you to explain a source of their dissatisfaction as rooted in frustration. 2) It also allows you to demonstrate that students are learning even if they don’t “like” the course.

In addition to providing your own set of evaluation questions, you can also provide another source of information in your materials for review. Many institutions now encourage peer evaluations. If you have time before your review materials are due, you might invite a colleague to observe you teaching a class and write an evaluation to include in your review file. For your next review, you might consider an on-going “faculty coaching” relationship. This is where two faculty team-up and spend time observing each others courses, discussing goals and strategies, and sometimes conducting focus groups with each other’s students. This is a formative process and can not only help improve students’ course ratings, but allows for another person who has worked with you in a sustained way, to speak to the dynamics in your classroom and your teaching strategies.

Finally, if you honestly think that students are responding to your personal characteristics (age, gender, race, sexuality), it could be appropriate to use some of the existing literature on factors that affect student course ratings, but again do not rely on these in a defensive fashion. Rather, show that you are in a situation that studies have shown to be associated with lower course evaluations. It is best not to use this literature in isolation, but in combination with one of the strategies above. (See the Report on Gender and the Evaluation of Teaching on the SWS website under Academic Resources <http://www.socwomen.org/index.php?sss=116>)

Again, this is a time to frame poor evaluations as an opportunity for becoming a better teacher, as stated above. Be clear that you WILL work to improve your evaluations, however it will not be at the cost of diminishing your commitment to your feminist pedagogy. Be sure to explain that commitment and how it makes you a good teacher now, even if it is not showing up through student course evaluations.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps!

-- Jane

Do you have a question for Jane?
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