

## The Center for College Affordability and Productivity

### Background information on Ratemyprofessor.com

We have received a number of questions about the use of Ratemyprofessor.com (RMP) data in ranking universities. To address those questions, we've put together this background information on the latest relevant research.

Rate My Professors.com was founded in 1999 as TeacherRatings.com by John Swapceinski. This free online service allows university and college students from American, Canadian, British, New Zealand, and Australian Institutions to assign ratings to professors anonymously. It was converted to RateMyProfessors in 2001.

Any student who has cookies enabled on their web browser can enter in ratings of professors via RateMyProfessors.com. All categories are based on a 5 point rating system, with 5 as the highest rating. The categories are *Easiness*, *Helpfulness*, and *Clarity*. *Overall Quality* is determined by averaging the *Helpfulness* and *Clarity* ratings given by students. An overall quality rating of 3.5 to 5 is considered good (yellow smiley face), a rating of 2.5 to 3.5 is considered average (green face), and an overall rating of 1 to 2.5 is considered poor (blue sad face). There is also a *chili (hotness)* component that assesses the professor's physical appearance. A professor receiving more *hots* than *not hots* is given a chili by his or her name.

### Arguments/Evidence that RMP is not valid

- RMP is unrepresentative because raters are unlikely to be a random sample of an instructor's students
  - This could bias the findings for example, if only students unhappy with their grade use the website to get back at their teacher.
- Ratings are determined by the easiness of the course, and how "hot" the instructor is
  - Attractiveness, Easiness, and Other Issues: Student Evaluations of Professors on RateMyProfessors.com by Felton, Mitchell, and Stinson
    - They find that the easiness ranking of the course, and the hotness of the instructor, are correlated with the quality of the class.
    - They conclude that student evaluations of teaching in general "do not measure actual educational performance."

### Arguments/Evidence that RMP is valid

- While the contributors to RMP may or may not be a random sample, their ratings are similar to other ratings systems.
  - An empirical test of the validity of student evaluations of teaching made on RateMyProfessors.com by Sonntag, Bassett and Snyder
    - Comparing RMP data to other student evaluations, they find that RMP ratings are correlated with the quality of the course.
    - "The assumption that public web-based student evaluations of teaching are not valuable because of the potential for response bias was not supported by the results of the present research."
    - "The results of this study offer preliminary support for the validity of the evaluations on RateMyProfessors.com."

- RateMyProfessors.com versus formal in-class student evaluations of teaching by Coladarci and Kornfield
  - “the two primary RMP indices correlate substantively and significantly with their respective SET criterion variables”
    - Translation: RMP and standard student evaluations give similar ratings.
  - “These results, we believe, should give pause to those who are inclined to dismiss RMP indices as meaningless.”
- University of Waterloo TRACE Newsletters - September 2001, No. 7, Ratemyprofessors.ca
  - 15 of 16 Distinguished Teacher Award winners received the highest ratings from RMP.
  - RMP ratings were “consistent generally with the way instructors are rated on course evaluations.”
- Problems with bias due to easiness or hotness are not unique to RMP, and are in fact an issue with any student evaluation system.
  - The hotness effect on ratings was discovered using RMP data, but this is because standard evaluations don’t ask about hotness. If they did, there is no reason to believe that the result from RMP data wouldn’t be replicated.

### **Bottom Line**

In spite of some drawbacks of student evaluations of teaching, they have value for the 86% of schools that have some sort of internal evaluation system. RMP ratings give similar results to these systems. When combined with the significant advantages of being uniform across different schools, not controlled by any given school, and publicly available, this indicates that RMP data is a preferred data source for information on student evaluations of teaching.