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The Final Word

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You may be shocked to see the same professor scheduled to teach the same course you took with them last semester. Obviously your analysis of them and their teaching wasn’t read, right? While there’s a slim chance this is true, it’s most likely not the case. Even though they’re still employed and that dreadful course is still offered, what you wrote at the end of the semester can have more influence on instructors and courses now than ever before.

Perhaps you hated the class or couldn’t understand your professor. Maybe it was required and you were trapped – but did you do anything to ease the pain for those who naively registered for the same class next semester? No, a bad evaluation – or even a class-full of them – usually won’t be enough to drive a professor out of Iowa State; everyone has their off-semesters. What it does do is raise red flags for departments and instructors when things aren’t going as smoothly as they should.

“If [departments] see that student evaluations aren’t where they should be, they pretty much demand and expect that faculty members seek to improve,” Associate Provost David Holger says.

Each department in the university can act upon student evaluations in whatever way they decide is most effective. Bad reviews can impact instructors’ salaries, prevent them from being promoted or tenured or lead a professor to seek help through the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT).

CELT director Ann Marie VanDerZanden has done classroom observations for a number of faculty members through CELT, about 95 percent of which were the result of faculty reacting to student evaluations, she says. One challenge that can come from these evaluations is personal attacks against a professor.

“Professors are humans as well, and when you get these cutting comments that are personal attacks that have nothing to do with the quality of the teaching or the content of the course, that’s hard,” VanDerZanden says. “As a faculty member you have to decide what you can do something about and what you just have to let go.” Constructive criticism is the most valuable thing that students can provide at the end of a course.

Just because you don’t see immediate repercussions from those critical words you may have written doesn’t mean they were for nothing. “It doesn’t always help you. It helps the people coming after you, but if you don’t help them nobody will,” Holger says. VanDerZanden notes that smaller changes are often made first, and then evaluated to see if they make a difference.

In the last year, the university has adopted Class Climate, an online course evaluation system that can potentially transform how such assessments are used. Providing instant analysis and the ability to customize evaluations, the program can give professors more insight as to how they’re doing as often as they choose.

Since this system has been in place, an analysis of evaluations suggests that students write more when online than on paper. Though the quality of this increased feedback hasn’t been determined, it has positive implications for the future of both student and faculty success at Iowa State.

In the end it comes down to one simple fact: voicing honest, constructive opinions can help end vicious cycles of boring courses, ineffective professors and wasted tuition dollars.
Iowa State Facts

Farm House is the oldest building on campus, built in 1860.

Abraham Lincoln signed the law that gave birth to the land-grant universities. Iowa State was among the first of these colleges, which were founded on three big ideas:
- Open higher education to all
- Teach practical classes
- Share knowledge far beyond the campus borders.

Muscle & Fitness magazine ranks Iowa State’s student body the third most fit in the nation.

According to the Academy of Management Journal, Iowa State’s marketing department is ranked fourth nationally for programs without a Ph.D. program.

For the ninth-straight year, US News & World Report notes ISU learning communities among its “Programs to Look For.”

The world’s first electronic computer was invented on the Iowa State campus in the late 1930s.

On average it costs $17 per class for an in-state student.

Hach Hall is the newest building on campus, built in 2010.

Iowa State’s central campus was cited among the top three of great sites in a national landscape architects’ centennial list.

More Iowa high school graduates and transfer students enroll at Iowa State than at any other higher education institution in Iowa.

On average it costs $33 per class for an out-of-state student.
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