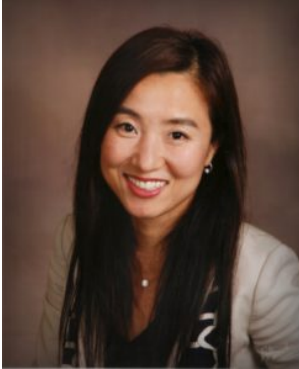




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Dear Students, Your Words Hurt Me: Caring for Faculty Navigating Student Evaluations

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At the end of semesters, I often share a joke with my colleagues: “I love teaching – except for the grading!” There’s a truth hidden in that humor. Grading involves a host of emotions: joy, frustration, pride, disappointment, even confusion. Then, once we’ve finally completed the grading marathon, another emotional rollercoaster begins: student evaluations of teaching (SET).

The Emotional Weight of Student Feedback

Please don’t misunderstand. I genuinely appreciate constructive feedback from students. Their insights reveal my blind spots, push me to be more creative, and encourage me to grow. However, there are also times when I’m unsure how to engage with critical remarks, which can sting and leave me feeling disheartened. In these moments, I worry that my passion for teaching might be overshadowed by hurt or frustration.

You’re Not Alone

Do we, as faculty, have a safe space to process our emotional responses to student evaluations?

How do we take care of ourselves – and each other – when we feel vulnerable? How do we hold on to our calling and commitment to our students during these tense times?

During my days as an adjunct faculty member teaching at multiple institutions the anxiety over student evaluations often kept me awake at night. A string of negative comments could threaten my already precarious job situation and some remarks carried undertones of bias regarding my accent or background. I often wondered, “Will these comments jeopardize my chances of being hired again?” and I even tried to guess who might have written them. It was tough not to take things personally.

Later on, as an early-career professor, I spent countless hours designing courses, clarifying assignments, and perfecting deadlines. So when a student mentioned that my instructions were confusing, I felt deeply frustrated. I asked myself, “Where is this coming from? Did I overlook something in my teaching?” I ended up spending even more time reflecting, revising my approach, and working hard to address any real gaps in my pedagogy.

Finding Balance Amid Criticism

Sometimes I notice only the critical comments, letting them overshadow the many notes of affirmation and thanks. Other times I skim over the praises too quickly, missing opportunities to celebrate successes and build upon effective practices.

If you’ve ever felt torn about how to use student feedback constructively – without losing heart – please know you’re not alone. Feeling this tension can actually be a sign of how deeply you care about your vocation and your students. Many of us go through these emotional swings but remain silent for fear of appearing unprofessional or overly sensitive.

Seeking Support and Sharing Stories

At this moment, I hope you seek trusted colleagues, mentors, or friends to debrief painful comments and interpret them with empathy and deep care. Allow yourself to feel the disappointment without dismissing it. Processing these responses can bring perspective and prevent lingering resentment or burnout.

Engaging with feedback can be an opportunity to refine lesson plans, improve communication, or sharpen pedagogical skills. It’s not easy work! But sharing our stories and learning from one another is one way we can practice self-care as educators. We stand in solidarity with each other, striving to grow and thrive in our teaching.

I remember a conversation with a first-generation Korean scholar with over thirty years of teaching experience. She confessed that she still faces hurtful biases in student evaluations. After honest reflection, her final piece of advice was: “Sometimes, you just have to delete it and let it go.” We both recognized we had already processed and learned from the feedback. Knowing when to let go continues to be a meaningful form of self-care.

Moving Forward

Dear colleague, when you next receive that email with student evaluations, take a moment. Recall your passion for teaching, your calling, and your commitment to growth – both your own and that of your students. Let all those emotions guide you toward reflection and learning. And remember, once the feedback has served its purpose, it's okay to let it go (yes, you can delete it!).

<https://wabash.center/2025/04/dear-students-your-words-hurt-me-caring-for-faculty-navigating-student-evaluations/>