

Rating RateMyProfessors.com

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IN THESE INFORMATION-RICH AND DATA-HAPPY TIMES, ratings are everywhere. Buyers and sellers rate each other on eBay; car dealers send out rating cards to buyers; Amazon sends e-mail to customers asking them to rate their purchase experiences; dating services ask clients to rate themselves as well as one another. Why shouldn't students join in the fun and rate their professors? We think professor rating sites perform a valid service in disseminating information about professors that help students make informed decisions about what courses they will or will not take. Moreover, rating sites can potentially assist professors by providing a feedback loop between student opinion and professorial performance, which could be useful in improving teaching techniques. But rating services beware; turn around is fair play. Rating services are not created equal. Below are our ratings for RateMyProfessors.com. (Disclaimer: As with any rating service, one must consider the motives of those who ask the questions and those who supply the answers, including this review. Both of us are on the faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles, one as a tenured professor and another as a lecturer. Both of us have been rated favourably at ucla.professors.com. One has been favourably rated at RateMyProfessors.com; the other is unrated at that site.)

ESC 31.4 (December 2005): xx-yy

1. The Seriousness Factor

What happened to course content? Is “Clarity” really the same as providing tools for critical analysis, imparting information, and laying the foundation for professional knowledge and methodologies? Although “Clarity” might be defended as a purposely vague category aimed to elicit specific comments from students, in our view “Content” would be a better choice. Clearly presented rubbish is still rubbish.

2. The Laziness Factor

Granting that easiness may be a valid consideration for students who are already carrying a heavy course load, and recognizing that, on RateMyProfessors, scores in this category do not contribute to an instructor’s overall rating, we still feel that the presence of “Easiness” as one criterion among four throws a troubling emphasis on doing as little as possible for a given course credit. “Ease of Learning” might be a better (or additional) category, since it introduces considerations not primarily of workload but of how accessibly complex material has been presented.

3. The Sleaze Factor

Are chili peppers a valid criterion for effective teaching? In an earlier incarnation of the site, the FAQ provided a link to a *New York Times* article saying that surveys show good-looking and sexy professors get higher course ratings than average-looking (not to mention downright ugly) ones—hardly a *justification* for equating sexiness with a good education but, merely, an indication of status quo practices. In the site’s current incarnation, the *Times* link is gone, but chili peppers remain front and centre. Of course, “Hot” might be understood to allude not primarily to physical characteristics but to a captivating manner, a lively style of presentation, and a vivid ability to convey the excitement of intellectual challenges. These are validly related to teaching and should be considered.

4. The Consumerist Factor

The site’s FAQ states that the site owners regard students as consumers. This business orientation provides the primary justification for the site. Yet there are important differences between students and consumers that make this a badly flawed comparison. Corporations have a legal obligation to produce profit for their shareholders, and businesses have an economic incentive to do the same for their owners. The exigencies of the market dictate that corporate processes are dominated by this imperative. Pleasing

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consumers sells products, and selling products produces profit. Research universities and liberal arts colleges, on the other hand, are not-for-profit ventures. They are not in the business of making profits but of creating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge. Although patents, inventions, and products may result from the creation of knowledge, this is not their primary goal. Large research universities have very big research expenses, and this necessarily requires that they actively seek grants and other income-producing vehicles. Although priorities sometimes get muddled, these should be sought in order to produce new knowledge, not as goals in themselves. When universities are captured by profit-making enterprises, as happened when the biology and chemistry departments of a certain university were funded almost exclusively by a pharmaceutical company, the results are disastrous for the university and the knowledge enterprise, because this situation results in pressure not to report research results adverse to the company's interests and to pursue only those lines of inquiry consistent with the company's profits. For-profit educational institutions such as Phoenix University and other such learning enterprises are claiming increasing market share, and these institutions probably do regard students as their consumers, and rightfully so. Not-for-profit universities and colleges, however, usually do not and should not regard students as consumers but as participants in the communal project of knowledge construction. The goal is not to please the students (at least not directly) but to give them the preparation, knowledge, and tools they need to learn about their inheritance from the past, critically analyze the present, and create opportunities for the future through their chosen majors and other academic endeavors.

5. The Tackiness Factor

We are disappointed to see that the site accepts paid advertising, complete with tasteless banner ads and obnoxious pop-ups. Does this send the wrong message about education—that is, should education be fundamentally about participating in a capitalist consumer society? More on this below.

6. The Profit Factor

In the site's FAQ, the owners state that they are "ordinary people" who see themselves as providing the student-as-consumer with a worthwhile service. At the same time, they are also engaged in a profit-making venture, including soliciting advertising for the site and urging users to help advertise it. While the site is now free to use, it continues to solicit labour

from users, asking them to become “administrators” for their campuses, vetting responses, etc. We have reservations about rating sites managed as for-profit ventures. A better solution, in our view, is to have locally-run and organized sites paid for by student association fees. To be fair, however, one cannot reasonably expect the site owners of RateMyProfessors.com to provide their labour for free, and one could argue that the advertising pays for a service that users find useful, much as ads on television pay for expensively produced programs viewers can watch for free. But maybe there is a better solution to the problem of obnoxious advertising. This thought leads to our tongue-in-cheek conclusion.

7. The Professors-Get-With-It Factor

Since the site accepts advertising, perhaps professors should go with the flow rather than complaining about bad ratings. Why not advertise your course at the site? And while you are at it, include banner ads urging your students to remember what fun your course was, how much they learned, and what an exciting (“hot”) teacher you are. Be generous—give yourself *several* chili peppers. The increased revenue generated by professors clamouring to put their ads on the site will allow the owners to implement more functionalities. Following the precedent of sites like Amazon.com, they could provide smart technology that would generate messages like these: “Students who liked course x also liked course y” and “Better together! Don’t sign up for just one of Professor Jones’s courses; sign up for all three and get a discount on your tuition!” The future is ours. We have only to accept the idea of rating sites, and then we can put the skills we have so laboriously gained over the years to work figuring out how we can exploit them to our advantage.

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