Student Perceptions of Learning Experience

Rationale and Broad Principles of Design

A Report

by

the Ad Hoc Committee on

Student Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness

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Committee Members

Name	Affiliation
John Pan (Chair)	Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering, CENG
Anelise Sabbag	Statistics, COSAM
Shantanu Kumar	Construction Management, CAED
Laura Cacciamani	Psychology and Child Development, CLA
Eduardo Zambrano	Economics, OCOB
Jermaine Washington	Architecture, CAED (Lecturer)
Carrie A. Langner	Psychology and Child Development, CLA (Department Head)
Jett Palmer	Student Representative (ASI)
Silvia Marijuan	World Languages and Cultures, CLA (CFA)
Kylie Parrotta	Social Sciences, CLA (Faculty Affairs Committee)
James Bingaman	Agricultural Education and Communication, CAFES (Instruction Committee)
Simone Aloisio	Academic Personnel (ex officio, non-voting)
Jean Lee	Academic Programs and Planning (Faculty Director)
Patrick O'Sullivan	Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (ex officio)

Executive Summary

The Academic Senate charged this committee with providing a revised policy and instrument to replace AS-759-13, which established the current university-wide student evaluation questions in 2013.

The current instrument asks students to assess "educational effectiveness" — a judgment that peer-reviewed research has shown to be susceptible to bias linked to the instructor's gender, race, and other characteristics, and that does not reliably measure teaching quality. Students are, however, uniquely positioned to report on their own experience of the learning environment — whether they felt the instructor engaged with them as individuals, whether expectations were clear and consistently applied, and whether the environment supported their participation and learning.

Building on this distinction, and drawing on the TEval framework for multidimensional evaluation of teaching (Austin et al., 2025), the committee approved the following five motions:

1. **Rename the instrument** to Student Perceptions of Learning Experience (SPLE).
2. **Adopt six aspects of class climate** as the focus of the instrument: Regard for Students, Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations, Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources, Perceived Course Coherence, Participatory Climate, and Responsive Learning Environment.
3. **Retain open-ended questions** tied to specific aspects of class climate through structured prompts, accompanied by an informational anti-bias preamble.
4. **Report Likert-scale results as frequency distributions** — raw counts together with percentages — excluding the use of means and medians, and provide guidance for the proper interpretation of these results.
5. **Administer the instrument using a hybrid approach** where online surveys are completed during in-class time in the last two weeks of instruction before finals.

The remainder of this report provides the rationale, evidence base, and implementation details for these recommendations.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2013, the Academic Senate adopted AS-759-13, establishing the current university-wide student evaluation questions. In 2025, ASI Resolution #25-04 called for reform of the evaluation instrument and processes. In turn, the Academic Senate established the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Perception of Teaching Effectiveness, charged with providing a revised policy and resolution to replace AS-759-13.

The committee was given the following charges:

1. Reviewing the reliability and validity of the prompts required on all student evaluation instruments, suggesting revisions to the prompts if necessary, and determining if additional prompts are necessary to obtain a more reliable and valid assessment of teaching effectiveness at Cal Poly.
2. Revisiting the criteria for procedures for conducting student evaluations to increase response rates and reduce incidences of bias, particularly negative bias toward people of color, women, and other minoritized populations in student feedback.
3. Reviewing how both quantitative and qualitative data collected from student evaluations are provided to faculty, the analysis of the data, and how data are presented for review for retention, promotion, and tenure. The committee should also consider as part of their charges what data is appropriate for development of teaching effectiveness purposes and data appropriate for performance evaluation.
4. Suggesting processes for disseminating results of student evaluations to Cal Poly students.[1]

[1] After consulting with the Academic Senate Faculty Affairs Committee, Academic Personnel, and CFA, the committee learned that it is not possible to share course evaluation survey information with students under the current CBA and therefore did not pursue this charge further.

1.2 Summary of recommendations

The proposal this committee has crafted has five parts.

First, it unanimously recommends that the instrument known as the **Student Evaluation of Instruction** and **Student Evaluation of Faculty** in the University Faculty Personnel Policies[2] be renamed as **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience**.

Second, it unanimously recommends for the aspects of teaching effectiveness assessed through the **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** instrument to be the following:

Interpersonal — how the instructor relates to individual students:

1. Regard for Students
2. Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations
3. Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources

Structural — how the course is experienced as a whole by the students:

4. Perceived Course Coherence

Environmental — what the classroom feels like as a shared space:

5. Participatory Climate
6. Responsive Learning Environment

In the context of this recommendation, the committee unanimously recommends that the Academic Senate establish a standing committee with broad representation charged with oversight of all student feedback instruments and initiatives—summative, formative, and department-originated—including future revisions to the instrument.

Third, the committee discussed whether to remove open-ended questions from the summative instrument due to the extensive evidence of bias in unstructured student comments (see Evidence on bias in open-ended comments below). A motion to remove them from the Student Perceptions of Learning Experience obtained three votes in favor and five votes against. The motion failed. The committee then voted unanimously to retain open-ended questions in the Student Perceptions of Learning Experience instrument under structured prompts and guardrails designed to minimize bias (see Guardrails for open-ended questions below).

Open-ended questions remain a key component of the companion Formative Learning Feedback proposal, where they serve their intended developmental purpose.

The committee understands that the final decision on open-ended questions rests with the Academic Senate, and that endorsement of this report does not commit the Senate to either approach.

[2] In sections 3.2, 3.4, 7.2, 8.1 and 8.4.

Fourth, it unanimously recommends that Likert-scale results be reported as frequency distributions — raw counts together with percentages — excluding the use of means and medians, with guidance for the proper interpretation of these results (see Chapter 4).

Fifth, it unanimously recommends a hybrid approach where online surveys are completed during in-class time in the last two weeks of instruction before finals (see Chapter 5).

This report is organized as follows. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the rationale for the instrument's name and design. Chapter 4 establishes scoring and reporting guidelines. Chapter 5 addresses implementation best practices. The appendix presents a sample survey instrument with a recommended preamble and sample items. The items presented in the sample survey are illustrative. They are intended to demonstrate how the six aspects of class climate can be operationalized as experiential survey items. **The sample survey is not intended to be the final instrument.**

Chapter 2

Student Perceptions of Learning Experience (SPLE)

The name change recommendation in this chapter was approved unanimously by the committee.

2.1 Rationale for the name change

The current names — **Student Evaluation of Instruction** and **Student Evaluation of Faculty** — mischaracterize what the instrument does and should do. The word "evaluation" implies that students are rendering a verdict on the quality of instruction or on the instructor. They are not. As detailed below, the proposed instrument asks students to report on their own experiences in the classroom: whether they felt treated with regard, held to consistent standards, able to access help, able to see how course elements connected, comfortable participating, and that the learning environment was responsive to them. These are experiential reports, not evaluative judgments.

This distinction is not merely semantic. The peer-reviewed literature on student evaluations of teaching (SET) establishes that items framed as evaluations of teaching effectiveness, course effectiveness, or instructor competence are particularly susceptible to bias — including bias linked to the instructor's gender, race, and accent — and are evidently misleading (Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark, 2016; Stark, 2016; Stark, 2026). By contrast, items that ask students to report on their own experience are less susceptible to these biases, precisely because they do not ask students to make judgments they are not qualified to make. The name of the instrument should reflect what it actually measures.

2.1.1 Sources of evidence about the validity and bias of SET

Some earlier research has argued that student evaluations are valid and reliable measures of teaching effectiveness (e.g., Marsh, 1987; Abrami, 2002; Berk, 2005). This committee exam-

ined this claim in light of the more recent experimental and quasi-experimental evidence summarized below.

Studies that claim SET are fair and valid rely on data that cannot answer the relevant question. Some studies compare average SET for male and female faculty and conclude there is no bias because these averages are similar. That conclusion is unwarranted because "one cannot assess gender bias in SET merely by comparing how women and men are rated by students: that comparison does not control for actual differences in teaching effectiveness, subject matter, class size, format, etc., resulting in confounding (Boring et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2016). The appropriate question is not 'do men and women get similar ratings?' but rather 'would a given instructor teaching a given course have received different ratings if their gender had been different but nothing about their teaching were different?' " (Stark, 2026, p.7).

Randomized experiments and natural experiments — where nature assigns subjects to treatments as if at random — in real class settings provide the strongest evidence about whether SET measure teaching quality or something else. Such research has found:

- SET have weak or negative association with objective measures of learning (Carrell and West, 2010; Braga et al., 2014; Boring et al., 2016)
- SET have substantial bias from gender: female instructors sometimes get lower ratings than objectively less effective male instructors (Boring et al., 2016); gender affects ratings of "objective" items like promptness (MacNell et al., 2015; Boring et al., 2016); bias varies across disciplines (Boring et al., 2016; Mengel et al., 2018); the bias of male and female students towards male and female faculty differs (Boring et al., 2016)
- SET have bias from ethnicity and gender (Chisadza et al., 2019)
- SET have stronger association with grade expectations than with learning (Boring et al., 2016)
- Students reward grades — not learning — by giving high SET scores (Cho et al., 2015; Carrell and West, 2010; Braga et al., 2014; Stroebe, 2020)
- Providing cookies during class increases ratings of instructors and course materials (Hessler et al., 2018)
- The number of points on Likert scales affects gender differences in SET scores (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2019)
- Student perceptions of their learning do not match objectively measured learning (Deslauriers et al., 2019; Dunning et al., 2004; Hartwig and Dunlosky, 2017; Knof et al., 2024; Kruger and Dunning, 1999; Lake, 2001; Lindsey and Nagel, 2015; Wooliscroft et al., 1993; Xu et al., 2024)

Source: Stark, 2026, pp. 2–3

Moreover, such research has found that "bias may be large in some situations and small in others... Indeed, the main reason it is impossible to adjust SET for bias is that there are many

sources of bias that may interact in complex ways. SET cannot be presumed to be valid, reliable, or fair in any given course, department, or university, absent affirmative evidence of reliability, validity, and unbiasedness in that time and place." (Stark, 2026, p.8).

It is on the strength of the experimental and quasi-experimental evidence — which can control for these confounds — that this proposal reframes the instrument around experiential reports rather than evaluative judgments, since these are the ones that this literature finds most susceptible to bias.

2.2 The proposed name

Each word in the proposed name — **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** — is chosen deliberately:

- **Student**: the respondent.
- **Perceptions of**: what the data represent. The word "perceptions" acknowledges that the instrument captures how students experience the learning environment from their own vantage point. Their nature as perceptions is already captured in the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA §15.15). Students occupy a position in the classroom that no other observer shares — they are the only ones who can report on whether the instructor engaged with them as individuals, whether they could see how the course fit together, or whether they felt comfortable participating. "Perceptions" names this unique epistemic contribution directly: the data are the students' own account of their experience, grounded in what they are distinctively positioned to observe.
- **Learning Experience**: what is being reported on. "Learning experience" scopes the instrument to the educational context without making the teaching or the instructor the object of assessment. It signals that the data concern the student's experience of learning — the process, not the outcome — rather than a judgment of instructional quality.

Chapter 3

SPLE Questionnaire Design

The recommendations in this chapter — the adoption of the six aspects of class climate as the focus of the instrument, and the retention of open-ended questions under structured prompts with an informational anti-bias preamble — were approved unanimously by the committee.

3.1 Rationale for the aspects of teaching effectiveness chosen to be included in the survey

When determining which aspects of teaching effectiveness should be included in the **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience**, the committee used the following three criteria. This approach is consistent with the broader movement toward multidimensional evaluation of teaching, which recognizes that student surveys should focus on dimensions students are qualified to assess, as part of a comprehensive evaluation system (TEval Project, 2025; Austin et al., 2025).

1. **It carries a summative component.** The dimension is relevant to personnel decisions under the UFPP.
2. **Students are qualified to assess it.** Reporting on the dimension does not require disciplinary or pedagogical expertise (Palmer, 2026; Stark, 2016).
3. **Students can assess it with minimal bias.** The dimension concerns experiential reports rather than evaluative judgments that the literature identifies as particularly susceptible to bias.

A useful starting point for applying these criteria is the TEval framework developed by Austin et al. (2025), an NSF-funded initiative that draws on twenty-five years of scholarly work on teaching evaluation. The framework identifies seven dimensions of teaching for evaluation, each accompanied by guiding questions that articulate what the dimension captures. Together, the seven dimensions provide a comprehensive definition of high-quality educational practice.

The seven dimensions of the TEval framework (Austin et al., 2025)

Guiding questions for each dimension of the framework

Dimension 1: Goals, Content, and Alignment. What are students expected to learn from the courses taught? Are learning goals clearly articulated in a way that is accessible to all students? Are course goals appropriate for the course as part of the larger curriculum and for the audience for which it is intended? Are topics appropriately challenging and related to current issues in the field? Are the materials high-quality and aligned with course goals? Does the content represent diverse perspectives? Are assessments aligned with course goals?

Dimension 2: Teaching Practices. How is in-class and out-of-class time used? Are assignments, assessments, and learning activities designed to help all students learn? What effective or high-impact methods are used to improve understanding and engage all students in learning? Do in- and out-of-class activities provide opportunities for practice and feedback on important skills and concepts? Are forms of assessment varied to allow for the success of diverse learners?

Dimension 3: Class Climate. To what extent is the class climate respectful, supportive, and cooperative? Does it encourage motivation and engagement for all students? Do all students feel included? How are student-student and student-instructor dialogue fostered? What are the students' views of their learning experiences? How has the instructor sought student feedback, and how has feedback informed the instructor's teaching?

Dimension 4: Achievement of Learning Outcomes. Does the instructor clearly communicate the learning goals for the course? What evidence is used to determine the degree to which students achieve the defined course goals? How well are course assignments, assessments, and learning activities aligned with the defined learning goals? Are there efforts to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to achieve the learning goals? Are standards for evaluating learning clear and connected to program, curriculum, or professional expectations? Does the quality of learning support success in other contexts?

Dimension 5: Reflection and Iterative Growth. How and why has the instructor's teaching changed over time? How have changes been informed by evidence of student learning and student feedback? How has peer feedback been incorporated as changes in the instructor's teaching over time? How have the instructor's goals for their courses and students changed over time?

Dimension 6: Mentoring and Advising. How effectively has the instructor worked individually with undergraduate or graduate students? Does the instructor establish clear, individualized, and responsive expectations for student and mentor? Does the instructor provide constructive and timely coaching and feedback? How does the quality of and time commitment to mentoring fit with disciplinary and departmental expectations?

> **Dimension 7: Involvement in Teaching Service, Scholarship, or Community.** How has the instructor contributed to the broader teaching community, both on and off campus? Areas of contribution can include the learning culture in the department or institution (e.g., curriculum committees, program assessment, cocurricular activities); engaging with peers on or off campus in teaching communities, workshops, peer reviews, or similar activities; educational leadership activities (e.g., leading teaching workshops, presentations or publications about teaching, grants related to teaching).

When the seven dimensions are assessed against the three criteria above, one dimension stands out as the natural focus of the student survey: **Dimension 3 — Class Climate**. Class climate carries a summative component: the UFPP requires evidence of the instructor's effectiveness in creating a productive learning environment, and how students experience the classroom is directly relevant to that requirement. Students are qualified to assess it: reporting on whether the classroom felt supportive, responsive, and conducive to their learning does not require disciplinary or pedagogical expertise — it requires only that students reflect on their own experience. And students can assess it with minimal bias: items about class climate elicit experiential reports ("I felt treated with regard," "I felt the instructor created a learning environment that was responsive to all students") rather than the evaluative judgments about teaching effectiveness or instructor competence that the literature identifies as particularly susceptible to bias.

This focus on class climate is particularly fitting at a polytechnic university organized around Learn by Doing. Where students learn primarily through active engagement — in labs, studios, clinics, and collaborative projects — the learning environment is not a backdrop to instruction but the literal space in which learning happens. The climate of that space is, accordingly, not a secondary concern but a direct determinant of whether the pedagogy works.

The remaining six dimensions, by contrast, do not meet all three criteria. Dimensions 1, 2, and 4 — concerning course goals, teaching methods, and achievement of learning outcomes — require disciplinary or pedagogical expertise that students do not possess, and items targeting these dimensions are among those most susceptible to bias (Stark, 2016; Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark, 2016; Stark, 2026). Dimensions 5, 6, and 7 — reflection and growth, mentoring, and service — concern activities that students in a single course generally cannot observe or are not positioned to evaluate. It is worth noting that items asking students whether they feel they learned a great deal — while intuitively appealing — fall squarely within Dimension 4. The peer-reviewed evidence shows that perceived learning does not track actual learning. In a controlled experiment, Deslauriers et al. (2019) found that students who learned *more* (as measured by test performance) reported feeling they had learned *less*, and vice versa — a strong anti-correlation between perceived and actual learning. Uttl, White, and Gonzalez (2017), in a comprehensive meta-analysis correcting for small-sample and publication bias, found that the correlation between student evaluation ratings and

student learning is effectively zero. As Stark (2026) summarizes, student perceptions of their learning do not match objectively measured learning — a finding replicated across multiple disciplines and study designs. A "perceived learning" item would thus measure neither the learning environment nor actual learning, while carrying the same bias vulnerabilities as other evaluative items.

Having identified class climate as the appropriate focus, the committee then asked: *how can class climate be assessed comprehensively, with aspects that are conceptually distinct and collectively exhaustive?* The guiding questions for Dimension 3 in the TEval framework point toward the answer. They ask whether the climate reflects *regard for students as persons*, is *supportive*, and *cooperative*; whether it encourages *motivation and engagement*; whether all students feel *included*; how *dialogue* is fostered; and what students' *views of their learning experiences* are. Drawing on these guiding questions — and on the broader literature on classroom climate (Moos, 1979; Fraser, Treagust, and Dennis, 1986; Fraser, 1998; Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons, 2002; Frisby and Martin, 2010; Ambrose et al., 2010; Hurtado et al., 2012; Hagenauer and Volet, 2014) — the committee identified six aspects, each capturing a distinct facet of the student's experience in the classroom. In arriving at these aspects, the committee reviewed student course evaluation survey questions currently used by colleges and departments at both the San Luis Obispo and Solano campuses. Furthermore, in naming these aspects, the committee was deliberate in selecting language that describes what students experience without invoking terms that the literature associates with gendered or racialized expectations in evaluation contexts. These are described below.

Interpersonal — how the instructor relates to individual students

3.1.1 Regard for Students

What it captures: Whether the instructor engages with students as individuals — acknowledging their contributions, responding to their questions with care, and treating them as persons whose presence and participation matter.

> How Regard for Students differs from the other aspects
>
> An instructor can apply the same standards to everyone yet be dismissive in manner. A class can welcome questions without the instructor showing regard for the students offering them. A course can feel *coherent* (well-structured, connected) while the instructor is curt or condescending. Regard for Students is about the quality of interpersonal treatment, not consistency of standards (Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations), availability outside class (Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources), perceived course structure (Perceived Course Coherence), conditions for engagement (Participatory Climate), or belonging (Responsive Learning Environment).

3.1.2 Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations

What it captures: Whether expectations are communicated clearly and applied consistently — no favoritism, uniform access to learning and assessment.

> How Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations differs from the other aspects
>
> An instructor can show *regard for students as persons* while playing favorites. A class can feel responsive in atmosphere while grading or attention is unevenly distributed. A course can be *coherent* (activities clearly connected to goals) while standards are applied inconsistently. Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations is about equity across students, not the character of interaction (Regard for Students), availability outside class (Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources), perceived course structure (Perceived Course Coherence), the openness of the environment (Participatory Climate), or sense of belonging (Responsive Learning Environment).

3.1.3 Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources

What it captures: Whether the student can access the instructor and the resources the instructor provides — office hours, email, after-class conversations, course materials, and other support for learning.

> How Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources differs from the other aspects
>
> An instructor can be available one-on-one but create a poor in-class climate (Participatory Climate). A student may find the instructor easy to reach but, once there, feel dismissed (Regard for Students) or experience uneven standards (Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations). A course can be *coherent* in structure while the instructor is difficult to reach outside of class. Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources is about availability, not the quality of what happens during interaction (Regard for Students), consistency of standards (Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations), perceived course structure (Perceived Course Coherence), in-class environment (Participatory Climate), or belonging (Responsive Learning Environment).

Structural — how the course is experienced as a whole

3.1.4 Perceived Course Coherence

What it captures: Whether the student could see connections between course elements — that what happened in class, what was assigned, and what was assessed were recognizably related. A course can be highly coherent — readings connect to lectures connect to assessments — even when the content is disorienting or challenges students' prior beliefs.

Perceived Course Coherence might appear to belong with course design (Goals, Content, and Alignment) rather than with class climate. But what a peer reviewer assesses from the syllabus — whether the course elements are aligned — is different from what the student experiences in the classroom — whether the connections between those elements are *visible* to them. A syllabus can be perfectly aligned on paper while students experience the course as disjointed because the connections were never made explicit. It is this experiential dimension — perceived structure, not designed structure — that the SPLE measures, and that makes Perceived Course Coherence a class climate variable.

> How Perceived Course Coherence differs from the other aspects
>
> A class can score well on every other aspect — students treated with regard, standards applied consistently, instructor available, environment participatory and responsive — while the student still cannot see how the pieces fit together, how today's class connects to last week's, or how the assessments relate to what was covered. Perceived Course Coherence captures one specific, concrete experience: whether the student could see the connections between course elements. It is not a summary of the overall learning experience or a proxy for teaching effectiveness. It is about perceived structure, not interpersonal treatment (Regard for Students), consistency of standards (Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations), availability outside class (Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources), conditions for engagement (Participatory Climate), or belonging (Responsive Learning Environment).

Environmental — what the classroom feels like as a shared space

3.1.5 Participatory Climate

What it captures: Whether the classroom environment supports multiple modes of active engagement — asking questions, sharing ideas and/or resources, discussing with peers, and making mistakes without penalty. This aspect concerns the conditions for engagement, not the format of instruction — a lecture in which the instructor welcomes questions and responds to them thoughtfully is a participatory climate no less than a seminar built around discussion.

> How Participatory Climate differs from the other aspects
>
> A class can be participatory in structure while individual students still don't feel they *belong* (Responsive Learning Environment). The instructor can show regard for students in replies without the environment actually encouraging participation. A course can feel *coherent* (well-structured) while the classroom format discourages questions, discussion, or student-to-student dialogue. Participatory Climate is about the conditions for engagement in class — including peer interaction — not the quality of treatment (Regard for Students), consistency of standards (Consistent Communication

and Enforcement of Expectations), availability outside class (Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources), perceived course structure (Perceived Course Coherence), or belonging (Responsive Learning Environment).

3.1.6 Responsive Learning Environment

What it captures: Whether the instructor creates a learning environment that is responsive to the range of students in the class — one that reflects awareness of differences in background, preparation, learning needs, and experience, rather than treating all students as interchangeable.

How Responsive Learning Environment differs from the other aspects

A student can be treated with regard and held to consistent standards without feeling they belong. A class can be *participatory* (questions encouraged, ideas welcomed) while a student still feels like an outsider — because of whose experiences are centered, who dominates discussion, or what the implicit culture of the class signals. A course can be *coherent* (activities connect, expectations are clear) while a student feels the class was not designed with them in mind. Responsive Learning Environment is about belonging in the group, not individual treatment (Regard for Students, Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations), one-on-one availability (Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources), perceived course structure (Perceived Course Coherence), or conditions for engagement (Participatory Climate).

3.2 Evidence on bias in open-ended comments

The committee reviewed the following evidence on bias in open-ended comments. This evidence informed the committee's unanimous decision to retain open-ended questions only under the structured prompts and guardrails described in the next section.

The design of the **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** rests on a principle: ask students only about things they are qualified to report on, in a form that minimizes bias. The Likert-scale items above are carefully worded to elicit experiential reports — structured statements about what the student felt — rather than open-ended evaluative judgments. An unstructured open-ended question undoes this by design.

Open-ended comments reintroduce exactly the biases the instrument is built to exclude

When given an unstructured prompt, students are free to comment on anything — teaching effectiveness, grading leniency, course organization, the instructor's appearance, accent, or personality — all topics the literature identifies as particularly suscepti-

ble to bias (Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark, 2016; Stark, 2026). The structured Likert items constrain responses to experiential reports about class climate; an open-ended field removes that constraint entirely.

⚠ The research on open-ended comments is clear

In a controlled experiment where identical online courses were taught under male and female instructor names, students commented on women's appearance and personality far more often than men's (Mitchell and Martin, 2018). An analysis of over 14 million reviews found that male professors were described as "brilliant" or "genius" two to three times more often than female professors across every field studied (Storage et al., 2016). A survey of 674 academics found that the highest volume, most derogatory, and most threatening abuse in student evaluations is directed at women and academics from marginalized groups — leading the authors to conclude that anonymous comments in student evaluations must be removed if institutions wish to be inclusive (Heffernan, 2023). A review of over 100 articles on SET bias concluded that open-ended comments show "the strongest evidence of equity bias" and recommended that "the use of qualitative comments, where equity bias is most apparent, should be limited and cautious" (Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman, 2021). The scale of the problem is considerable: a survey of 791 Australian academics found that more than 91% reported receiving non-constructive comments — clustering into comments about attire, appearance, and accent; allegations against character; general insults; projections of blame; and threats or calls for punishment (Lakeman et al., 2023). At one large university, a machine-learning screening system flagged 6.9% of all student comments — 4,258 out of 62,049 — as potentially harmful; manual screening at that scale is not feasible, which means institutions that include open-ended comments in the personnel file are including content they cannot even review (Gibson et al., 2022).

⚠ Open-ended comments resist the reporting standards this proposal establishes

The scoring and reporting methodology for the **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** that this Committee recommends — frequency distributions, no numerical averages, no cross-comparisons — is designed to prevent misinterpretation and misuse of the data. Open-ended comments cannot be reported as frequency distributions, cannot be standardized, and invite selective quotation by evaluators. A single vivid comment, whether positive or negative, can disproportionately influence a reader in ways that a frequency distribution of structured responses does not (Boysen et al., 2014; Linse, 2017).

A growing number of institutions are restricting or removing open-ended comments

Cal Poly Pomona, the University of Houston, and Florida State University restrict open-ended comments so that only the instructor can see them. St. Olaf College's Office of Institutional Effectiveness states plainly: "Invitations for open-ended comments should be avoided, as these tend to produce the strongest evidence of bias." USC eliminated student evaluations from tenure and promotion decisions in 2018. UCLA made them optional for personnel actions in 2024. Dalhousie University made student ratings entirely formative — no results are shared with chairs or deans. Miami University's policy states that evaluations "will be conducted for formative purposes only." The University of Toronto Faculty Association, as of January 2026, has an active grievance at arbitration challenging the use of student evaluations, citing discriminatory, harassing, and abusive comments that members receive in the open-ended portions of their evaluations.

This does not mean students should have no voice beyond the six items. It means that unstructured feedback belongs in the formative component of the evaluation of teaching — a separate, developmental process designed exclusively to help the instructor grow as an educator (Centra, 1993; Berk, 2005). Best practices are that formative results are shared only with the instructor and are not used for employment decisions (Benton and Young, 2018; Stark and Freishtat, 2014). In this context, open-ended questions can serve their intended purpose without the risk of biased comments influencing personnel decisions.

3.3 Guardrails for open-ended questions

If the Academic Senate elects to retain open-ended questions in the Student Perceptions of Learning Experience, which is this committee's recommendation, the committee recommends the following guardrails:

The committee recognizes that open-ended questions provide qualitative information that structured items alone cannot capture — including the ability to surface concerns the instrument designers did not anticipate and to give students a voice in their own words. In a listening session with ASI on April 13, 2026, students expressed support for retaining open-ended questions, noting that they allow students to provide context for their Likert-scale responses and to offer suggestions for improvement. Their input helped shape the committee's decision to retain open-ended questions under structured prompts. The TEval framework emphasizes that effective evaluation involves "multiple lenses," and that the student lens captures experiences invisible to peer reviewers and self-reports (Austin et al., 2025). It is for this reason that the committee voted to retain open-ended questions rather than remove them, while adopting the guardrails described below to mitigate the equity bias that the literature documents in unstructured responses.

1. **Informational framing.** The preamble must explicitly instruct students to comment

on specific aspects of their learning experience and to avoid comments about the instructor's personal characteristics, consistent with the anti-bias framing described in Section 5.5 (Boring and Philippe, 2021).

2. **Structured prompts, not generic invitations.** Open-ended questions must not use generic prompts such as "Please comment on the instructor" or "What are your suggestions for improvement?" Instead, each open-ended question should be tied to a specific aspect of class climate — for example, asking the student to elaborate on their experience of class coherence. This channels comments toward the dimensions the instrument measures and away from the unstructured commentary that the literature identifies as most susceptible to bias.

Residual bias in open-ended responses. The evidence on informational framing and structured prompts is encouraging for structured Likert-scale items (Boring and Philippe, 2021), and the SPLE is designed to benefit from this effect. The evidence is less encouraging for open-ended responses. Owen, De Bruin, and Wu (2024) found that structured prompts improved the specificity and constructiveness of open-ended comments but did not reduce gender bias — women faculty were penalized at similar rates across all conditions. This finding is consistent with the broader literature documenting that the unstructured format of open-ended responses gives bias channels that structured items constrain.

Chapter 4

Scoring and Reporting Guidelines

The recommendations in this chapter were approved by the committee with 7 votes in favor, 0 votes against, and 2 abstentions.

4.1 Scoring Methodology

The following scoring approach applies to all items in the **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience.**

- **Ordered categorical data.** The responses are ordered categorical: the categories have a natural ranking but the distances between them are undefined. They are not interval-scale measurements (Stevens, 1946; Jamieson, 2004). The instrument uses a structured fixed-response format — what the Collective Bargaining Agreement terms "Scantron form, etc." (CBA §15.17), and the resulting survey data constitute student course evaluations under that provision.
- **Five ordered categorical response options:** Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.
- **A Not Applicable (N/A) option** is also available for each question.
- **No numerical scoring.** The categorical responses are not assigned numerical values, as those values cannot be interpreted and their presence encourages misinterpretation. As Stark explains:

  > "While it is common to replace the category names with numbers, for instance, using '1' to signify 'strongly disagree' and '5' to signify 'strongly agree,' the numbers themselves are not quantities, just new labels. They are codes that happen to be numerical. The actual magnitudes of the numbers do not mean anything. The labels are arbitrary. Averaging such numbers is meaningless as a matter of statistics. For the average to be meaningful, the difference between '1' and '2' would need to mean the same thing as

the difference between '4' and '5.' A '1' would have to balance a '5' to be the equivalent of two '3's. But adding or subtracting labels from each other does not make sense, any more than it makes sense to add or average postal codes" (Stark, 2016, ¶28–29; see also Stark, 2026).

4.1.1 Why frequency distributions are preferred over measures of central tendency for this instrument

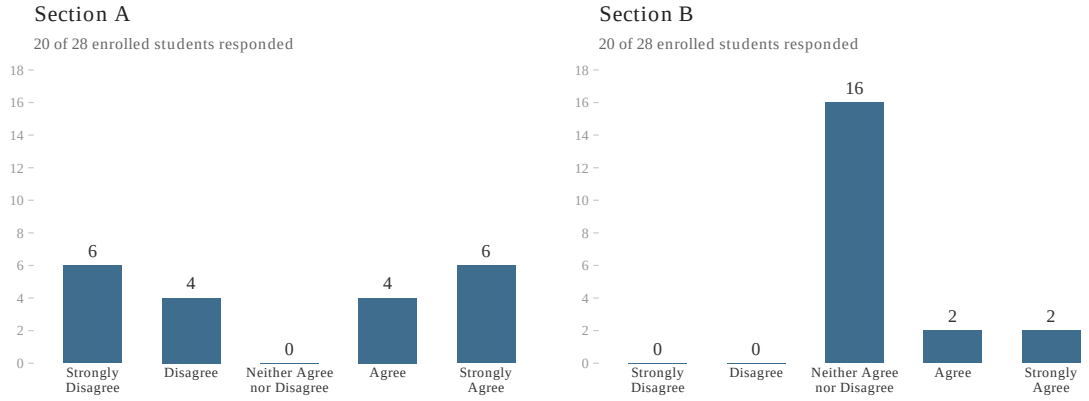
With only five possible values and many more than five students in a classroom, the median cannot move until the distribution shifts enough to push the 50th percentile across a category boundary. Small but meaningful differences — and even some large ones — are invisible to it. This creates two distinct problems.

4.1.1.1 Problem 1: The median hides variation

Two distributions can have very different spreads yet produce the same median.

Table 4.1: Frequency distribution of responses (20 of 28 enrolled students responded)

	Section A	Section B
Strongly Agree	6	2
Agree	4	2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	16
Disagree	4	0
Strongly Disagree	6	0



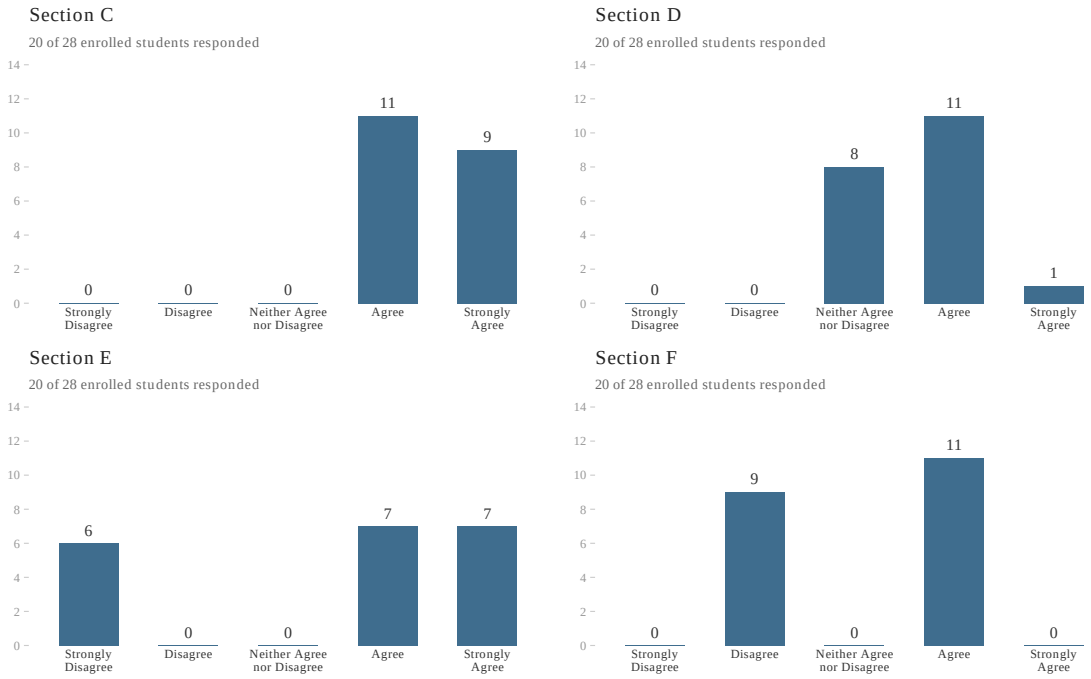
Sections A and B above have the same median (Neither Agree nor Disagree), and very different distributions. Section A is deeply polarized — students are split between strong agreement and strong disagreement. Section B is concentrated at the center. An evaluator seeing "Neither Agree nor Disagree" twice would assume these are similar. They are not.

4.1.1.2 Problem 2: The median is too coarse to locate the center

The median also fails to distinguish distributions that differ in where their weight sits. Problem 1 showed that two distributions with different spreads can share a median. The following examples show that even distributions with very different centers of gravity — where one class is overwhelmingly positive and another is split down the middle — can produce the same median.

Table 4.2: Frequency distribution of responses (20 of 28 enrolled students responded)

	Sec. C	Sec. D	Sec. E	Sec. F
Strongly Agree	9	1	7	0
Agree	11	11	7	11
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	8	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	9
Strongly Disagree	0	0	6	0



All four sections report median = "Agree." But Section C is overwhelmingly positive, Section D is lukewarm, Section E is fairly polarized, and Section F is a knife-edge split. The median cannot tell them apart because five categories do not give it enough resolution — the distribution must shift *a lot* before the median moves to the next step. The distributions shown above shift *plenty* and the median does not budge.

The frequency distribution tells you instantly which case you are looking at. The median

hides it.

In practice, the problem is sharper still. Student evaluations are typically such that most students who respond to the survey report nominally positive experiences. With a five-category scale and typical class sizes (15–40 students), the median will almost always fall at "Agree" or "Strongly Agree." This compresses nearly all instructors into two bins, making the median nearly useless for the purpose it is most needed for: helping evaluators distinguish between cases.

A well-designed bar chart is not merely an illustration — it is itself the most effective summary available. As Tufte (1983) observed, the best statistical graphics communicate the full distribution of the data at a glance, rendering patterns, extreme values, and variation instantly legible in a way that no single summary statistic can. For a five-category ordinal variable, a bar chart *is* the summary measure — one that preserves the distributional information that the median discards.

4.2 Reporting Guidelines

- **Frequency distributions.** The number of students whose response falls in each category should be reported as raw counts together with percentages.

> ⚠ Care in interpretation of percentages
>
> Percentages make it easier to compare the shape of a distribution across sections with different numbers of respondents — "30% Strongly Agree" is immediately interpretable in a way that "7 out of 23" requires mental arithmetic. For evaluators reviewing many courses, percentages provide a quicker read of the distributional pattern.
> However, with the class sizes typical of most courses, percentages create a misleading impression of precision: a single student's response can shift a percentage by several points, and the small denominator is hidden from the reader. Reporting counts — e.g., "7 out of 23 respondents" — keeps the sample size visible and discourages over-interpretation (Lang and Secic, 2006, Ch. 1). For this reason, percentages should always be reported alongside raw counts and the total number of respondents, never in isolation.

- **Response rates.** Both the number of enrolled students and the number of respondents should be reported.
- **No extrapolation.** Results should not be extrapolated from responders to nonresponders. Students who submit evaluations are a self-selected sample of convenience, not a random sample; standard statistical measures of uncertainty such as standard errors and confidence intervals are therefore inapt (Stark, 2026).
- **No cross-comparisons.** Results should not be compared across instructors, courses, departments, or disciplines. This is so for the following two reasons:

First, student experience scores are confounded with variables unrelated to teaching effectiveness — including the instructor's gender, race, and age — and these biases are large enough to cause more effective instructors to receive lower scores than less effective ones (Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark, 2016). The bias cannot be corrected because it varies by discipline, by student gender, by survey item, and by other factors. This means that comparing Instructor A's scores to Instructor B's scores — even for the same course — does not reveal who taught more effectively. It reveals the combined effect of demographics, student biases, and nonresponse patterns.

Second, cross-comparisons are invalidated by differences in course characteristics that have nothing to do with teaching: class size, course level, whether the course is required or elective, and student preparation (Stark and Freishtat, 2014, Recommendation 5; McKeachie, 1997, p. 1222). Evaluators should assess each faculty member individually; evaluations and decisions should stand alone without reference to other faculty members or to a unit average (Linse, 2017).

The following table illustrates the recommended reporting format. Each cell contains the raw count and percentage of respondents selecting that category. The table caption states both the number of respondents and the number of enrolled students, making the response rate immediately visible. No numerical averages or information about other instructors or groups of instructors appear.

Table 4.3: Frequency distribution of responses (22 of 33 enrolled students responded; response rate 67 percent)

	Question 1	Question 2
Strongly Agree	6 (27%)	6 (27%)
Agree	7 (32%)	8 (36%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	4 (18%)	3 (14%)
Disagree	3 (14%)	4 (18%)
Strongly Disagree	2 (9%)	1 (5%)

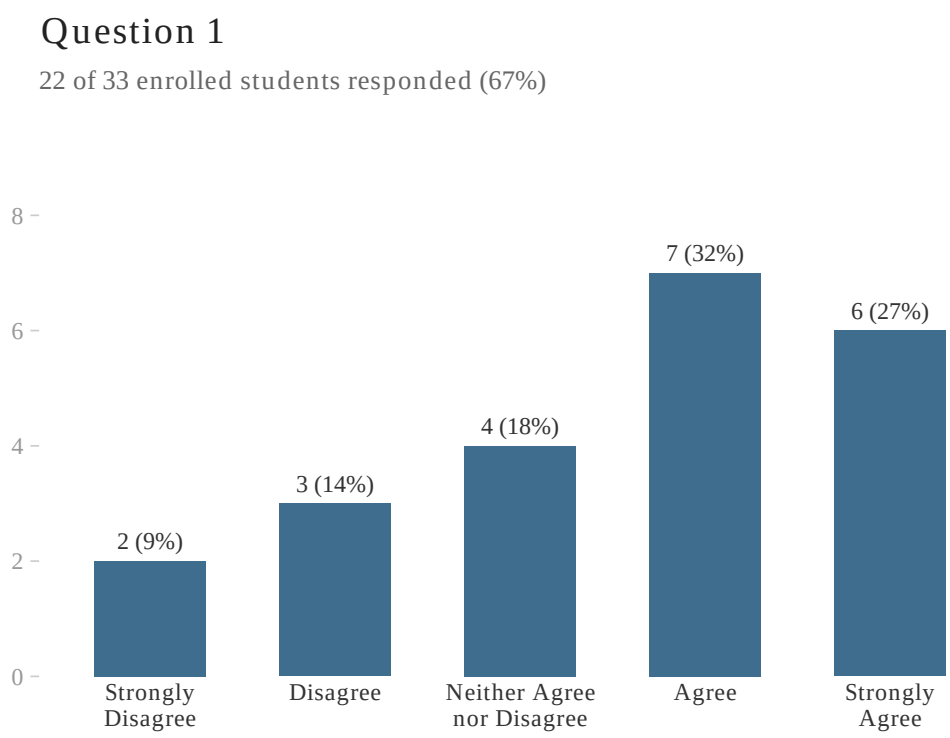
4.3 Visualization Guidelines

The distribution of responses should be examined across the entire scale, not reduced to a single summary statistic (Linse, 2017; Stark and Freishtat, 2014). The distribution should also be displayed as a bar chart showing the count and percentage of respondents in each category.

4.3.1 Bar chart for a single question

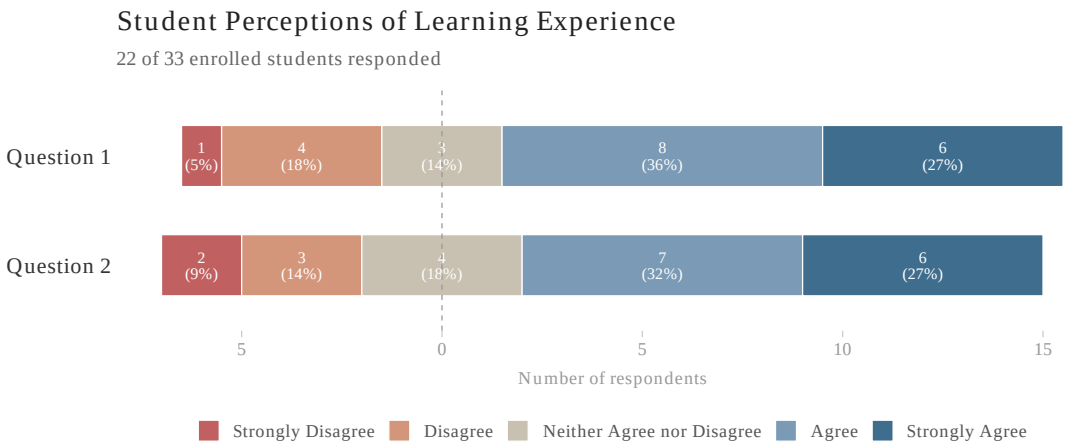
For individual instructor reports, a simple vertical bar chart is the most transparent format. Each bar represents one response category; the vertical axis shows the count of respondents,

with percentages displayed alongside. The response rate appears as a subtitle.



4.3.2 Diverging stacked bar chart for comparing multiple questions

When multiple survey items from an individual need to be compared at a glance, a diverging stacked bar chart is recommended. In this design, proposed by Heiberger and Robbins as "the primary graphical display technique for Likert scales," bars diverge from the neutral midpoint: agreement categories extend to the right, disagreement categories extend to the left, and the neutral category is split evenly across both sides (Heiberger and Robbins, 2014). This layout makes the balance between agreement and disagreement immediately visible — the reader can judge the overall sentiment by comparing the visual mass on each side of the center line. Each segment is labeled with the raw count and percentage; zero-count categories are omitted.


Student Perceptions of Learning Experience
22 of 33 enrolled students responded
Question 1
1 (5%)
4 (18%)
3 (14%)
8 (36%)
6 (27%)
Question 2
2 (9%)
3 (14%)
4 (18%)
7 (32%)
6 (27%)
5
0
5
10
15
Number of respondents
Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree

Chapter 5

Implementation Best Practices

The recommendations in this chapter were approved unanimously by the committee.

The preceding chapters define *what* the **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** (SPLE) measures — six aspects of the learning environment that students are qualified to report on — and *how* its results should be scored and reported. This companion chapter addresses a third question: *how should the instrument be administered?*

Cal Poly's transition to semesters — from 10-week quarters — is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to design the administration of this instrument from scratch rather than inheriting the practices of a system it replaces. The recommendations below draw on the peer-reviewed literature and on the published practices of peer institutions to propose a concrete implementation model for the SPLE.

5.1 Scope

This chapter addresses the implementation of the SPLE — the summative instrument whose results enter the personnel file under CBA §15.17. It does not address the evaluation of teaching more broadly, nor does it address course design, pedagogy, or the other dimensions of the TEval framework that are assessed through peer review, self-reflection, and other evidence sources.

The broader literature on teaching evaluation recognizes that many institutions complement their end-of-term summative instrument with informal mid-semester formative feedback — brief, anonymous check-ins designed to give instructors actionable information while the course is still in progress. Oregon's two-survey model, Angelo and Cross's Classroom Assessment Techniques (1993), and Harvard's early-feedback recommendations (Bok Center) all exemplify this practice. Developing a formative feedback process at Cal Poly is a **separate effort**. A sub-committee of this Ad Hoc Committee prepared a separate document that is not part of this report — Formative Learning Feedback: A Companion to the Student Perceptions of Learning Experience Report — that addresses this topic in detail. This chapter

does not address it further.

The sections that follow focus exclusively on the SPLE instrument: when to administer it, how to administer it, how to maximize response rates, and how to frame it to minimize bias.

5.2 Timing

5.2.1 The literature consensus

The peer-reviewed literature is clear on one point: summative course evaluations should be administered during the **last one to two weeks of instruction, before final examinations begin**. Administering evaluations before students receive final grades avoids contaminating responses with grade-related anxiety or gratitude — a well-documented source of bias (Centra, 2003; Marsh, 2007). Administering them too early misses late-semester developments in the learning environment.

What peer institutions do

Institution	Evaluation Window	Source
San José State	~10 days; last 2 weeks of classes	SJSU Teaching Evaluation; SOTE Interpretation Guide (2022)
San Diego State	~14 days; two-week window before finals	SDSU Student Feedback
UC Davis	Last week of each quarter (~7 days)	UC Davis ACE
UC Santa Barbara	Week 9 Monday – Week 10 Friday (~10 days)	UCSB Course Evaluations
UC San Diego	Week 9 Monday – Week 10 Saturday 8 AM (~6 days)	UCSD SET

All of these institutions release results only after final grades have been submitted — a universally recommended practice that protects anonymity and ensures that neither students nor instructors face grade-related pressure during the evaluation period.

5.2.2 Recommendation for Cal Poly's semester

The SPLE window should be **open during the last two weeks of instruction before finals week**. This two-week window is consistent with the practice at most peer institutions, provides sufficient time for reminders and in-class completion, and ensures that the evaluation captures students' experience of nearly the full semester without bleeding into the final examination period.

5.3 Mode of administration

5.3.1 The response-rate problem

The single most important administrative decision is the *mode* of administration, because it largely determines the response rate.

The evidence is unambiguous: **in-class administration** produces the highest response rates. Paper-based in-class administration historically achieved **80–90%** response rates (Nulty, 2008; Berk, 2013). By contrast, **online-only outside-class** administration typically produces **30–60%** response rates — a range in which self-selection bias is a serious threat to the validity of the data (see Section 5.4).

5.3.2 The hybrid model

A growing number of institutions have adopted a hybrid approach: dedicating class time for students to complete the evaluation *online*, on their own devices. This combines the response-rate benefits of in-class administration with the logistical efficiency of an online platform. Studies report response rates of **70–80%** with this model — comparable to traditional paper-based in-class administration (Berk, 2013; Chapman and Joines, 2017).

The hybrid model is particularly well suited to the SPLE. The instrument is designed to be short and focused — a student can complete it in under ten minutes on a phone. Ten to fifteen minutes of dedicated class time is more than sufficient, even accounting for the time to display the link, wait for students to access it, and allow for thoughtful responses.

5.3.3 Recommendation

The summative SPLE should use a **hybrid model**: during the evaluation window, each instructor dedicates **10–15 minutes of class time** for students to complete the survey online. The instructor displays the survey link (URL or QR code), then **leaves the room**. A designated student or TA signals the instructor to return when time is up. Students who are absent during the in-class session complete the evaluation outside of class during the remainder of the window.

This is the single most effective step the university can take to ensure that the SPLE produces high enough response rates.

5.4 Maximizing response rates

5.4.1 Why response rates matter

When response rates are low, the students who choose to respond may differ systematically from those who do not — they may be more satisfied, more dissatisfied, higher-performing, or lower-performing than the class as a whole. This self-selection bias is not a theoretical concern; it is well documented. As Stark (2026) emphasizes, students who submit eval-

uations are a self-selected sample of convenience, not a random sample, and there is no statistical basis for extrapolating from respondents to the class as a whole.

Springer (2015) found that online evaluation respondents differed from non-respondents in academic achievement, satisfaction, and motivation. Holtgraves and colleagues (2023) found that non-respondents were not a random subset of enrolled students and that the resulting bias could not be corrected by statistical adjustment. Springer (2016) further showed that the *direction* of the bias varied by course context — meaning that the bias cannot be predicted or corrected post hoc.

i Strategies ranked by effectiveness: what the literature says

The literature identifies the following strategies, roughly ranked by their demonstrated impact on response rates:

1. **Dedicate class time for online completion.** This is the single most effective intervention. It converts the evaluation from a task students must remember to do on their own time into one that is built into the structure of the course (Berk, 2013; Chapman and Joines, 2017).
2. **Multiple automated reminders.** Adams and Umbach (2012) found that four reminders spaced at 2–3 day intervals brought response rates to approximately the 70th percentile of course-level rates. Each additional reminder (up to four) produced a statistically significant increase.
3. **LMS integration.** Embedding the evaluation link within Canvas — as a dashboard notification, a pop-up reminder, or a course navigation item — reduces the friction of locating and accessing the survey. Students are already in the LMS daily; the evaluation should meet them there.
4. **Instructor communication.** When instructors discuss the evaluation on Day 1 (e.g., a syllabus note explaining that the SPLE asks about the student's learning experience and that the data are read and taken seriously), and again when the evaluation window opens, response rates increase modestly. The mechanism is legitimacy: students participate when they believe their feedback matters (Chen and Hoshower, 2003).
5. **Class-level incentives.** Goodman, Anson, and Belcheir (2015) found that a class-level incentive (e.g., a bonus point if the class achieves an 80% response rate) increased response rates by approximately 22 percentage points. Class-level incentives avoid the coercion problem of individual incentives because no individual student's participation can be identified.

5.4.2 Recommendation

We recommend the following:

- **Dedicate class time.** Each instructor should set aside 10–15 minutes during the

evaluation window for students to complete the SPLE online in class. The instructor displays the survey link or QR code, then leaves the room. This is the single most effective intervention for achieving high response rates.

- **Send four automated reminders** at 2–3 day intervals during the evaluation window, via email and Canvas notification.
- **Integrate with the LMS.** Embed the evaluation link within Canvas — as a dashboard notification, pop-up reminder, or course navigation item — so that the survey meets students where they already are.
- **Encourage instructor communication.** A brief mention on Day 1 (e.g., a syllabus note explaining that the SPLE asks about the student's learning experience and that the data are taken seriously), repeated when the window opens, increases participation.

5.5 Framing the instrument to minimize bias

5.5.1 The evidence on anti-bias framing

A natural question is whether the instructions presented to students before they complete the evaluation can reduce the biases documented in the literature — particularly gender bias. The answer is nuanced: it depends entirely on what kind of framing is used.

Normative framing — generic appeals to fairness such as "Please evaluate your instructor fairly, regardless of their gender, race, or other characteristics" — has been shown to have **no significant effect** on evaluation outcomes. Boring and Philippe (2021) tested this directly in a large-scale field experiment at Sciences Po and found that a normative anti-bias warning produced no detectable change in the gender gap.

Informational framing — pairing the warning with institution-specific data showing that previous cohorts had evaluated male and female instructors differently — produced a markedly different result. In the same experiment, Boring and Philippe found that informational framing significantly reduced the gender bias, raising ratings of female instructors without affecting ratings of male instructors. The effect was driven primarily by male students' evaluations of female instructors; female students' ratings were not significantly affected by either treatment.

An important caveat: The evidence that informational framing reduces bias applies to *structured Likert-scale items*. It does not extend to *open-ended responses*, where the unstructured format gives bias room to operate regardless of how the prompt is framed. Owen, De Bruin, and Wu (2024) found that even directed, structured prompts — while they improved the specificity and constructiveness of open-ended comments — did not reduce gender bias. This is one of the reasons the committee considered discontinuing open-ended questions from the summative instrument, and ultimately voted to retain them only under the structured prompts and guardrails described in Chapter 3.

5.5.2 Recommendation

The SPLE should open with a brief, concrete, **data-informed preamble** — not a generic "be fair" appeal, which the evidence shows is ineffective, but a factual statement that provides students with context about what the survey measures and what the research shows about evaluation biases. The preamble should:

1. **Name what the survey measures.** Remind students that the SPLE asks about their *own experience* of the learning environment — not a verdict on the instructor as a person or professional.
2. **Provide specific information about documented biases.** A brief, factual statement — e.g., "Research shows that students' evaluations of their learning experience can be influenced by characteristics of the instructor unrelated to the learning environment, such as gender and race. Being aware of this tendency helps produce more accurate feedback."
3. **Reinforce the survey's purpose.** The data are used to understand the student learning experience and to support faculty development and evaluation. Thoughtful, honest responses improve the quality of the data.

The name **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** is itself a framing device. By directing attention to the student's *experience* rather than to the instructor's *performance*, the instrument's name reinforces the experiential focus that the bias literature recommends.

> **i** Draft preamble language
>
> **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience**
> This brief survey asks about *your experience* in this course — the learning environment, your interactions with the instructor, and how you perceive the course was structured. It does not ask you to evaluate the instructor's teaching ability or the course content.
> Research shows that students' responses to surveys like this can be influenced by characteristics of the instructor — such as gender, race, and accent — that are unrelated to the learning environment. Being aware of this tendency helps you provide more accurate feedback.
> Your responses are anonymous and will not be shared with the instructor until after final grades have been submitted. Please respond thoughtfully and honestly.

5.6 Recommended implementation model

The following table synthesizes the evidence reviewed in this chapter into a concrete recommendation for administering the summative Student Perceptions of Learning Experience under Cal Poly's semester calendar.

Element	Recommendation	Rationale
When	Last two weeks of instruction before finals week	Literature consensus: last 1–2 weeks of instruction, before finals begin (Centra, 2003; Marsh, 2007)
Mode	Hybrid: dedicated class time for online completion	Single most effective method for achieving 70%+ response rates (Berk, 2013)
Class time	10–15 min; instructor displays link/QR code, then leaves	The instrument is short and focused — feasible in under ten minutes
Framing	Informational preamble (data-informed, not generic)	Boring and Philippe (2021): informational framing reduces gender bias; generic appeals do not
Reminders	4 automated reminders at 2–3 day intervals	Adams and Umbach (2012): achieves ~70% response rates
Results release	Only after final grades are submitted	Universally recommended; protects anonymity and reduces grade-anxiety bias

Administering the SPLE in the final two weeks of instruction, with dedicated class time and an informational preamble is an achievable model — it requires no new technology, no additional personnel, and minimal class time — and it reflects the best available evidence on how to implement a student survey that is both useful and fair.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

The **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** proposed here is a short, focused instrument grounded in the peer-reviewed literature and aligned with the UFPP's requirements. By renaming the instrument, centering it on the six aspects of class climate that students are qualified to report on, and adopting guardrails for the open-ended questions to mitigate documented equity bias, we can give students a meaningful voice in the evaluation of teaching while protecting both students and instructors from the well-documented biases of traditional teaching evaluations. This is an achievable reform — one that strengthens the integrity of the evaluation process and brings Cal Poly's practices in line with a growing movement across higher education toward multidimensional, evidence-based evaluation of teaching (McCreary, 2026; Stark, 2026). Moreover, the instrument reflects Cal Poly's distinctive pedagogical identity: at a university where students learn by doing, a survey centered on the climate in which that doing takes place is not just methodologically sound — it is institutionally apt.

In addition, two sub-committees of this Ad Hoc Committee prepared companion documents that are separate from this report. These documents have not been formally adopted by the full committee and are offered as companion resources for consideration by the respective Academic Senate committees to which they are addressed.

- **Guidance for Evaluation of Instruction** — a proposed revision to UFPP §8.3 that organizes the evaluation of teaching around the seven TEval dimensions, includes a teaching effectiveness rubric adapted from the University of Kansas Benchmarks for Teaching Excellence, provides guidance on the appropriate and inappropriate uses of the survey data (including the inherent limitations of student evaluation data and the role of SPLE results within the broader evaluation framework), addresses department-associated questions, sets departmental expectations, and outlines training and implementation requirements. Offered for consideration by the Academic Senate Faculty Affairs Committee.
- **Formative Learning Feedback: A Companion to the Student Perceptions of Learning**

Experience Report — a voluntary, developmental feedback process to be tentatively offered through the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT), organized around the seven research-based principles of learning identified by Ambrose et al. (2010), and designed to give instructors actionable information about how students are experiencing the learning environment while the course is still in progress. Offered for consideration by the Academic Senate Instruction Committee and the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology.

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Appendix A

Appendix: Sample Survey Instrument

This appendix presents a sample version of the **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience** (**SPLE**), including the recommended preamble and one item per aspect of class climate (two for Coherence). The instrument uses a five-point ordered categorical scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) plus a Not Applicable option for each item. The items presented here are illustrative. They are intended to demonstrate how the six aspects of class climate can be operationalized as experiential survey items. **This is not intended to be the final instrument.**

A.1 Preamble

The survey should open with the following informational preamble, consistent with the evidence on anti-bias framing discussed in Section 5.5 (Boring and Philippe, 2021).

> **Student Perceptions of Learning Experience**
> This brief survey asks about *your experience* in this course — the learning environment, your interactions with the instructor, and how you perceive the course was structured. It does not ask you to evaluate the instructor's teaching ability or the course content.
> Research shows that students' responses to surveys like this can be influenced by characteristics of the instructor — such as gender, race, and accent — that are unrelated to the learning environment. Being aware of this tendency helps you provide more accurate feedback.
> Your responses are anonymous and will not be shared with the instructor until after final grades have been submitted. Please respond thoughtfully and honestly.

A.2 Sample Items

All items use the following response scale:

Strongly Agree · Agree · Neither Agree nor Disagree · Disagree · Strongly Disagree · Not Applicable

A.2.1 Regard for Students

"I felt the instructor engaged with students as individuals."

A.2.2 Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations

"I knew what was expected of me in this course."

"I felt the instructor applied the same expectations and standards to all students."

A.2.3 Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources

"I was able to get help from my instructor when I needed it (in office hours, after class, or by email)."

"I was able to access the course materials and resources I needed for this class."

A.2.4 Perceived Course Coherence

"I could see how what was assessed related to what was covered in the course."

"I could see how the different parts of this course fit together."

A.2.5 Participatory Climate

"I felt there were ways for me to participate in the course."

"I felt the instructor created opportunities for me to explore the ideas in the course."

A.2.6 Responsive Learning Environment

"I felt the instructor created a learning environment that was responsive to all students."

A.3 Sample if the Academic Senate elects to retain open-ended questions

If open-ended questions are retained under the guardrails described in Section 3.3, the instrument would include one structured open-ended prompt on Perceived Course Coherence — the aspect where elaboration is most informative and least susceptible to bias. The prompt appears immediately after the Perceived Course Coherence Likert items and directs the student to describe their experience with course structure.

A.3.1 Perceived Course Coherence (with structured open-ended prompt)

"I could see how what was assessed related to what was covered in the course."

"I could see how the different parts of this course fit together."

"Please describe your experience with how the different parts of this course fit together — for example, how readings, class activities, assignments, and assessments related to each other. Focus on specific aspects of the course, not on personal characteristics of the instructor."

Your response here...

All other items (Regard for Students, Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations, Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources, Participatory Climate, Responsive Learning Environment) remain Likert-only.

A.3.2 Why an open-ended question only on Perceived Course Coherence?

The committee considered attaching an open-ended prompt to each of the six aspects and concluded that Perceived Course Coherence is the only aspect where the benefit of elaboration clearly outweighs the risk of bias. The reasoning, aspect by aspect:

- **Regard for Students.** An open-ended prompt here invites commentary on manner, demeanor, and personality — exactly the content that disproportionately targets women and faculty from marginalized groups (Mitchell and Martin, 2018). Highest risk, lowest benefit.
- **Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations.** An open-ended prompt here invites comments about grading, which correlates with grade *expectations*, not actual consistency of standards. It also invites favoritism allegations that can be racialized (Chisadza, Nicholls, and Yitbarek, 2019). High risk.
- **Access.** An open-ended prompt here invites commentary on communication style, accent, and warmth — all heavily gendered and racialized (Subtirelu, 2015; Miller and Chamberlin, 2000). High risk.
- **Responsive Learning Environment.** An open-ended prompt here could elicit valuable information, but it could also produce comments about the instructor's identity that are impossible to disentangle from bias. A student who doesn't feel they belong might attribute it to the instructor's demographics rather than to specific practices (Heffernan, 2023). Moderate-to-high risk.
- **Perceived Course Coherence.** This is the safest choice. An open-ended prompt here channels comments toward course structure — readings, assignments, assessments, the connections between topics. These are the most impersonal, practice-oriented

comments a student can make. It is hard (but not impossible) to write something biased about whether the exam matched the lectures. And it is the aspect where elaboration is most useful to evaluators — a Likert response tells you the student didn't see the connections; a structured comment tells you *which* connections were missing.

- **Participatory Climate.** An open-ended prompt here could produce useful structural feedback (e.g., "group work was dominated by two people," "questions were welcomed but never answered"). But it readily invites evaluative commentary about the instructor's teaching style — particularly judgments like "the lectures were boring" or "there was too much group work." Research shows that students conflate instructor enthusiasm and charisma with teaching effectiveness, even though enthusiasm is not associated with learning (Feeley, 2002; Williams and Ceci, 1997). A comment like "boring" tells you about the student's affective response — which may reflect the instructor's gender, accent, or presentation style — not about whether the environment supported participation. This kind of feedback is valuable in the formative process, where the instructor can contextualize it; in the personnel file, it becomes indistinguishable from bias. Moderate risk.

A.4 Relationship to Existing Cal Poly Maritime Academy Practices

Several of these aspects are already tracked in other CSU instruments. The Cal Poly Maritime Academy, for example, includes items on Consistent Communication and Enforcement of Expectations ("The instructor attempted to be fair and unbiased in their interaction with students"), Responsive Learning Environment ("The instructor demonstrated awareness and consideration of the diversity of students in the class"), Access to Instructor and Instructor Resources ("The instructor was responsive when I had questions"), and Participatory Climate ("The instructor provided opportunities for class participation"). The SPLE items are compatible with this existing practice. The principal difference is one of framing: the SPLE items are worded as first-person experiential reports ("I felt…") rather than third-person assessments of instructor behavior ("The instructor attempted…"), consistent with the evidence that experiential items are less susceptible to bias than evaluative ones.