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INTRODUCTION

Many students are concerned about the lack of grade transparency, especially in the Humanities. Professors often do not provide students with feedback regarding grades until the end of the class, and other students are entirely unaware of their standing in a class until they check their final grade. However, this is not supposed to be the case; the Yale College Course of Study Committee states that instructors must “provide students with some sort of feedback on their academic progress by around the middle of the term.” This policy aims to provide students with an idea of their progress in a course and their understanding of the content such that they may take the appropriate steps if they are performing unsatisfactorily. Although there are no official midterm grades, midterm is generally when instructors inform residential college deans of students who are struggling in their course. The student’s college dean will then discuss the student’s academic situation with him or her and may recommend tutoring for special assistance. More generally, providing midterm feedback allows students to better assess how well they are learning and to identify strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement. Thus, midterm feedback from instructors is crucial for ensuring that all students can react to poor course performance and/or improve their quality of learning.

A second portion of this project concerns midterm feedback from students to instructors. Although end-of-term evaluations are required for all classes, midterm course evaluations (MCE) are not standard practice in all classes. Yale undergraduate students have previously shown they would like instructors to conduct MCEs at the midterm or earlier. Both students and instructors have incentive to discuss what is effective and ineffective, and MCEs are a proper tool for accomplishing this goal. MCEs would allow prompt responses to unsuccessful practices and would contribute to improving instructors’ teaching and students’ learning.

PEER INSTITUTIONS

According to the websites of the respective colleges and universities, other schools require midterm grade reports and offer the opportunity for students to provide midterm feedback for their instructors. However, the extent to which these policies are followed is unclear.
Harvard

Shortly after the beginning of the semester, midterm grade reports are submitted to the Registrar’s Office, and progress reports are continually submitted until the end of the term. These progress reports are not part of the official record, as they are used for counseling or advising, especially for freshmen and students with unsatisfactory or unsubmitted work. Starting in the third or fourth week of the semester, instructors and teaching fellows are mandated to request anonymous feedback regarding aspects such as course material, pedagogy, and logistics. The Bok Center, which is analogous to the Yale Center for Teaching and Learning, provides templates and assistance with setting up evaluations and analyzing results.

Princeton

Instructors of introductory (100- and 200-level) courses submit midterm grades that students may view online. Students who are at risk of academic probation or failing introductory courses will be directed to the dean or director of studies. Instructors are furthermore urged to solicit midterm evaluations, but these are informal and seen only by the instructor.

Stanford

Stanford has templates for online evaluations available to all instructors and Teaching Assistants. These templates are sent to students 4-6 weeks into the quarter, and the Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning then assist in interpreting results.

University of Pennsylvania

Course instructors have access to Course Feedback question banks to obtain feedback from students regarding teaching.
DATA ANALYSIS

For courses across all subjects, students receive some kind of feedback with or without specific grades 68.5% of the time by the midterm. However, 9.5% of the time, students reported receiving minimal feedback until the final grade. Language classes had the highest level of feedback (73.3%) while science courses had the lowest (57.7%). These data indicate that there is still room for improvement for giving students feedback at the midterm for all classes.

For all courses, students receiving feedback most often received grades (41.5%), followed by comments from a professor or teaching assistant (TA) (25.4%) and performance relative to the class (15.9%). Across all departments, between 38 to 47 percent of classes provided midterm updates on grades. There was a noticeable difference in classes providing comments from professors or TAs for science and quantitative reasoning classes compared to humanities, social science and language courses (14% and 25-38% respectively). There was also a difference in courses offering assessment of a student’s standing relative to classmates, as science and QR courses provided this measure 23.6% and 27.20% of the time whereas humanities, language and social science courses provided this information 5.6%, 7.7%, and 15.7% of the time respectively.

Students wanted comments from their professors and/or TAs for future classes the most (38.7%), followed by grades (33.6%) and relative performance (25.44%). These values were very similar across grade levels and varied by 6% at most.

For all departments, professors and/or TAs solicited no feedback from students 51.6% of the time.

Humanities classes did not request feedback from students 46.2% of the time while language classes did not do so 55.3% of the time. 23.9% of classes gave students an opportunity for input via comments in a survey, 11.8% of feedback was through comments during office hours, 9.6% of feedback was through anonymous comments using Canvas and 3.0% of feedback was through some other kind of medium.

For future classes, most students wanted to give feedback through comments on a survey or via Canvas (45.3% and 39.7% respectively) while only 9.8% of students wanted to give feedback through comments during office hours. These values were relatively constant between different class years.
42.4% of students thought professors and/or TAs were receptive to student feedback and changed slightly and 8.3% of students thought professors and/or TAs changed significantly, but 13.5% of students said professors and/or TAs made no change in response to student feedback.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

➢ The lack of midterm feedback from professors caused students to occasionally drop classes due to lack of knowledge of academic progress
➢ Some classes only had one problem set or exam grade by the course drop deadline
➢ Cumulative grade distributions at the midterm would be helpful
➢ Students want more opportunities to evaluate how they are doing
➢ Many classmates agree there is a problem with professors asking for feedback and teaching ineffectively
➢ It is harder to approach professors in lecture classes, an anonymous feedback mechanism is most desirable
➢ Many students, professors, and TAs are unaware of the anonymous feedback section on Canvas
➢ Few classes were very receptive and proactive about soliciting feedback from students
➢ Students would like to give feedback to professors and TAs
➢ The earlier professors and TAs ask for feedback the better

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Courses should give students more feedback over the duration of the class, especially comments from professors and/or TAs and grades.

2. Professors and TAs should request feedback from students before midterm.

3. Course instructors should more frequently utilize the anonymous feedback system on Canvas, which many may be unaware of.
CONCLUSION

Receiving midterm feedback can help students evaluate their progress and adjust their learning based on their strengths and weaknesses. This information may also aid in decisions regarding dropping classes and increases transparency in grading procedures. Students should not need to rely on intervention from their residential college deans after unsatisfactory performance in a course and should instead be proactive about taking action to improve their learning before it gets to that point. Ensuring that all classes provide midterm feedback will help achieve this goal.

Soliciting midterm feedback from students will improve the quality of learning and maximize efficiency. Most students want to give comments through online surveys, and the infrastructure is already present on the “Feedback” portal on Canvas. Increased awareness and implementation of this resource would be a convenient way to take advantage of this feature. The Center for Teaching and Learning could also aid in analyzing these data which would reduce the burden on professors and TAs for finding the key areas of improvement. Requesting feedback earlier in the course would also be beneficial to the identification of practices that are effective or ineffective as soon as possible. Requiring midterm feedback from students would be realized using existing mechanisms and offers significant opportunity for enhancing learning.