1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we discuss the potential implications of commonly used student ratings of teacher performance on faculty members’ willingness to pursue innovative educational practices. Our fundamental contention is that student ratings of teaching are potentially detrimental to innovative education. In exploring this fundamental contention, we first examine the inherent evaluation and developmental challenges associated with student ratings. Next, we discuss the common uses, misuses, and abuses of student ratings from both an evaluative perspective and a developmental perspective. We then propose an alternative approach — one based on behaviorally anchored rating scales — for utilizing student ratings. This proposed approach can potentially limit the misuses and abuses of student ratings, and can promote their viability as useful and accepted tools for both evaluative and developmental purposes, especially for the latter. Finally, we conclude the paper with a statement of our beliefs regarding the dangers associated with adhering to a student-as-customer mode of teacher ratings — dangers which can discourage innovative educational efforts and pervert the educational process as well as undermine students’ acquisition of the competencies they will need to function effectively in modern society.
2. THE CHALLENGES OF STUDENT EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTION

Student evaluation of instruction seems to have spread like the plague throughout academe — a devastating plague that destroys the motivation of professional academics to pursue innovative education. Our basic thesis is that student ratings of teaching, as commonly used in most academic institutions, are subject to misuse and abuse and are detrimental to innovative education. Both misuse and abuse involve improper use of student ratings, but abuse is much more deliberate in nature in that it reflects a knowing subversion and malicious intent. Further, student rating forms, as currently structured in many, if not most, academic institutions are likely to fail in providing effective evaluation and promoting faculty development — which are the common justifications for their use. Instead of student evaluation of instruction being an effective instrument to promote development and innovation, it is potentially “an instrument of doom.”

An evaluation instrument, be it a performance appraisal used, say in business, or a student evaluation used in academe, theoretically has evaluative and developmental purposes, sometimes called summative and formative uses, respectively. To be meaningful for evaluative purposes, the instrument must be developed within the context of the essential skills that are required for success in a given set of activities. For the instrument to be effective, these essential skills must be clearly identified and described. Further, the usefulness of the evaluation instrument and process is limited by the capabilities of an evaluator to assess these skills accurately and meaningfully.

To be meaningful for developmental purposes, constructive feedback should be provided to help foster a person’s growth and development. This feedback can be supportive or corrective in nature, but always must be provided out of concern for the individual being assessed. The usefulness of the feedback provided is limited both by the competency and commitment of the evaluator and by the structure of the evaluation instrument.

Student evaluation of instruction, as it is commonly used in many institutions, does not meet the above-specified criteria for being a useful evaluative or developmental instrument. Further, by its very nature, student evaluations have the unintended consequence of discouraging innovative education. Continued use of student evaluations, without drastic alterations, is destined to fail in meeting the intended purposes and will continue to be detrimental to innovation. We therefore argue that either student ratings should not be used, or if they must be used, they need to be significantly revamped. This revamping should consider the definition of effective teaching, the essential skills of the teachers’ job, the appropriate training of