BEAUTY RULED OUT AS FACTOR
IN TEACHING EVALUATION STUDY - PRIOR FINDINGS REFUTED

TEMPE (October 15, 2004) — Looks don’t have much at all to do with how an instructor is rated by his or her students, according to a new research study by faculty at Arizona State University’s College of Public Programs. The results challenge a recent University of Texas at Austin study (Hammermesh & Parker, 2003) which caused quite a stir in academia and the press, when it suggested that attractive instructors received significantly better student evaluations of their teaching than their plainer counterparts.

The ASU research concludes that the UT findings omitted many independent variables that other studies show are important. By including them, the ASU study sheds more light on the continuing debate over how much value institutions of higher education should place on Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs). The Association of American University Professors takes the policy position that SETs should not be used as the primary measure of teaching effectiveness.

In their study, Arizona State University researchers, Dr. Heather E. Campbell, School of Public Affairs; Dr. Karen Gerdes, School of Social Work; and Dr. Susan Steiner, School of Social Work, collected data on 53 instructors teaching 78 classes in 5 departments and controlled for most factors considered to affect student evaluations of college faculty. They found that attractiveness was the least important of professor personal attributes (age, gender, race/ethnicity etc.)

The results suggest either that looks have no effect, or else exactly the opposite effect of the Hammermesh and Parker study, implying that plainer instructors receive better student evaluations of their teaching, if all other factors are equal. Another interesting comparison possible from the number of factors in the ASU data suggests that attractiveness is less important than gender, minority status and age in determining how teachers will be rated.
The research team also ran the Hamermesh and Parker model on their data to make sure that the difference in results was not due to ASU’s smaller sample size or the possibility that Texas students care more about instructor looks than do Arizona State University students. They came very close to replicating the Texas model on the ASU data and those results misleadingly indicated that attractiveness matters. This exercise supports the inference that Hamermesh and Parker’s conclusion of the importance of instructor beauty is due to omitted variable bias.

While the researchers at ASU acknowledge that prior evidence of gender and age bias is validated by their work, they have not found evidence of bias due to the factor of instructor beauty.

Professor Campbell noted, “The debate will continue on this issue, but the facts are, at least at ASU – that SET procedures are in place, students like them, and there is no clear research indicating what measure of teaching quality is better. The question of how one’s appearance contributes to professional success and performance is broad, but our team concluded that at least students aren’t shallow enough to judge teaching quality based on superficial physical attributes.”

The ASU College of Public Programs, which will be relocating to a new downtown Phoenix campus, includes the following academic and research units: the School of Community Resources and Development, the School of Public Affairs, the School of Social Work, the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, the Advanced Public Executives Program, Center for Nonprofit Leadership and Management, the Center for Urban Inquiry, the Morrison Institute for Public Policy and the Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Consortium.