

UWP 1

8/1/2023

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RateMyProfessor Affects Course Choices

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how our choices are influenced by online reviews? Well so have many others, leading to studies being conducted due to the potential impacts. Online reviews have the potential to affect us positively or negatively depending on the quality and quantity of the reviews (Lee).

Restaurant ratings are one such example of an online review, and patterns of human behavior, such as herd behavior, can be learned. Herd behavior, or the tendency to “follow others’ choices or opinions” (Ha 396), applies to the food industry; for example, in a study of the association between consumer choice and herd behavior, Ha found that the physical crowdedness of a restaurant and online review ratings were critical factors. As expected, consumer intention to dine in a restaurant was positively influenced by a medium or high crowdedness, and take-out was significantly influenced by the restaurant rating online. I think that this also applies to RateMyProfessors.

RateMyProfessors (RMP) is “the largest online destination for students to research and rate professors, colleges, and universities across the United States. [Their] mission is to provide a safe forum to share classroom experiences to help fellow students make critical education choices.” (“Rate My Professors: Find and Rate Your Professor or School”). It’s also indicated that they have a moderator team that is allowed to remove submissions that do not adhere to their

guidelines (“Rate My Professors: Find and Rate Your Professor or School”), which may potentially be removing information useful to the students. Although the validity is shaky at best, is RMP actually a useful tool according to UC Davis students? This study aims to examine impacts of RMP ratings on UC Davis student course enrollment to see whether its use is worth consideration at UC Davis via comparison with views on restaurant ratings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have been conducted in the past concerning the validity and impact of RMP. They were done to observe if student evaluations of professors and RMP provided different information. At UC Davis for example, the students have the UC Davis Course Evaluations that they fill out at the end of every quarter, which is important because these evaluations are a measure of the value of the class which is taken into consideration during promotions, tenure, and merit evaluations as school faculty members (Otto).

Anonymity of opinions to other students is expected in student evaluations, contrary to ratings on RMP, but does this knowledge lead to drastic differences? In a study of UCSD student evaluation and RMP data, they found out that RMP ratings are not extremely skewed, and that the summary ratings of quality are similar to the ones on student evaluations (Timmerman). They concluded that RMP could still be a valid source of information and should be taken into consideration during course registration. In a more recent study, it is referenced that even with questionable validity, RMP is still popular and utilized among students (Boswell), but also notes the concern in this field that RMP evaluations may be influenced by non-academic factors, such as attractiveness of the professor and how easy the course was (Felton).

The issue now lies in factors beyond what has been already examined to determine whether or not RMP is still a valid tool, such as when courses are limited and when there are too many students. When courses are limited, students may have no choice but to choose whichever course is offered, and many students opting for the same classes may force other students to register for non-preferred emptier classes. In my own experience, this situation is notably common in the course enrollment system at UC Davis. Hence, more research should be done to question the usefulness of RMP ratings, especially at UC Davis. This leads to the overarching research question associated with this paper: **Are RMP ratings worth consideration during course enrollment for students of UC Davis?**

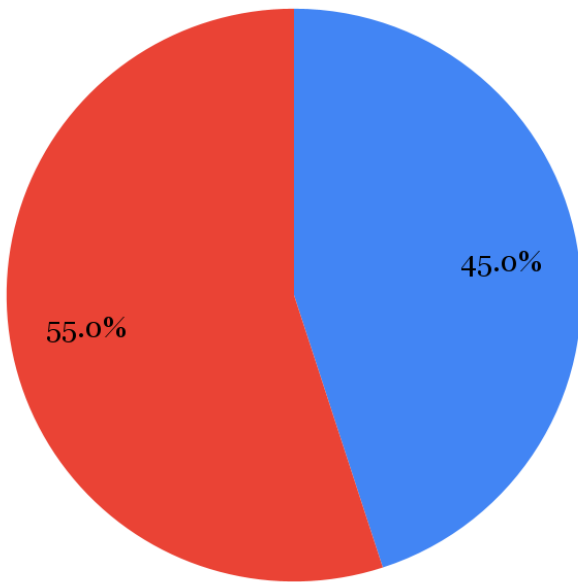
METHODOLOGY

Participants

For the purpose of this study, a convenience sample of current undergraduate students of University of California, Davis were chosen as participants. More specifically, students of UWP 1 (peers working on similar papers), students of The Green Unofficial discord server, my colleagues, and students of the UC Davis Rec Sports discord community responded. In theory, data from these people may be able to create a representative generalization of attitudes towards the topic, or at least be enough to learn something.

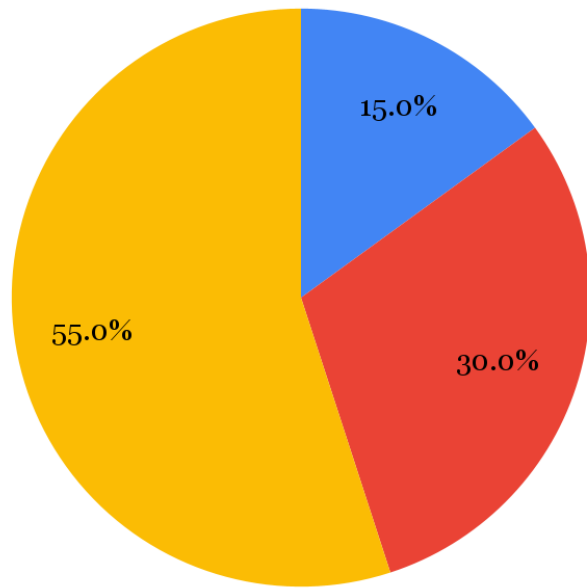
Demographic

Figure 1A



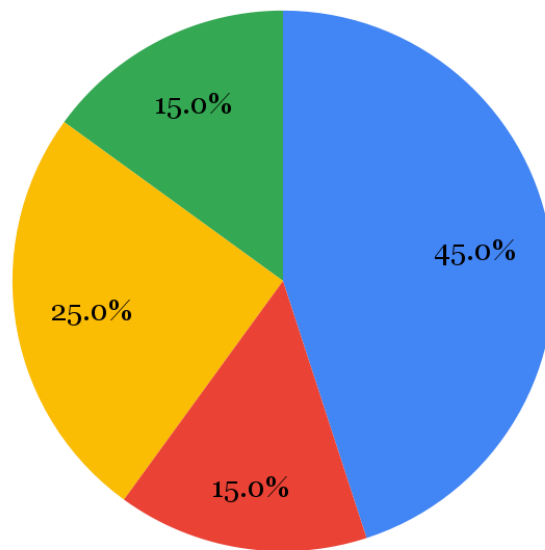
● Male ● Female

Figure 1B



● Sophomore ● Junior ● Senior

Figure 1C



● College of Letters and Science ● College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES)
● College of Biological Sciences ● College of Engineering

Figure 1. Participant demographics of interest. **(a)** Gender distribution of the 20 survey participants. **(b)** College year distribution of the 20 survey participants. **(c)** UC Davis college distribution of 20 survey participants.

Figure 1 displays the demographic distribution of participants. Gender-wise, 55% of respondents were female while 45% were male (Figure 1A), and they ranged from sophomores to seniors with 15% Sophomores, 30% Juniors, 55% Seniors (Figure 1B). There were no freshmen respondents due to the timing of the study conducted, which was during Summer Session 1 of UC Davis. At this time, the freshmen are not officially freshmen yet. Participants were mostly from the College of Letters and Science (45%), with some in the College of Biological Sciences (25%), and similar distributions of the College of Engineering and the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (15%) (Figure 1C).

Data Collection

Primary data was collected using an online google form to obtain analyzable data representative of the students of UC Davis. This survey included a total of 3 demographic questions, 8 likert-scale questions, and 3 open ended questions, and was available from 7/13/2023-7/17/2023. Demographic questions aimed to collect the college, year, and gender of students to visualize differences of opinion via demographic differences. Likert-scale questions aimed to gather student opinions on related statements regarding restaurant reviews and ratemyprofessor (RMP) to analyze differential opinions on different platforms of online reviews (ex. Restaurant ratings affect my decision on where to go; Ratings on RMP affect my course

enrollment decisions). Open-ended questions asked for clarification of responses and to see if ratings ever betrayed the students' expectations.

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis was done to develop trends and visualize data of likert-scale questions. After the data was collected, it was compiled into google sheets and was graphed according to the collected demographics. This showed trends, and how they differ between the demographic categories. These trends are reported as graphs with textual explanations.

Qualitative analysis was done to analyze similarities and differences between open ended responses of students to see general attitudes. This demonstrated how different adopted attitudes on ratings are reflected in the responses. Participants were labeled as numbers depending on when the response was submitted (lowest corresponding with earliest response and highest corresponding with latest response) to maintain anonymity. Data was then analyzed collectively, with the results grouped thematically and explained in the text.

RESULTS

Likert-scale question responses

Likert-scale questions were graphed with the axes of gender, college year, and college with likert-scale ratings of the following parameters: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3- neutral, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree.

Table 1. Overall agreement with statements of likert-scale questions

Statements	Average Likert Rating
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Restaurant ratings affect my decision on where to go	4.2
Ratings on RMP affect my course enrollment decisions	4.3
Lack of restaurant choices remove the impact of the ratings on my choice	3.47
Lack of courses remove the impact of RMP ratings on course enrollment decisions	3.6

Table 1 shows that overall, ratings do impact decision making, as do the lack of choices on the significance of said ratings. The average likert rating for statements regarding RMP was higher overall for the statements.

Figure 2A

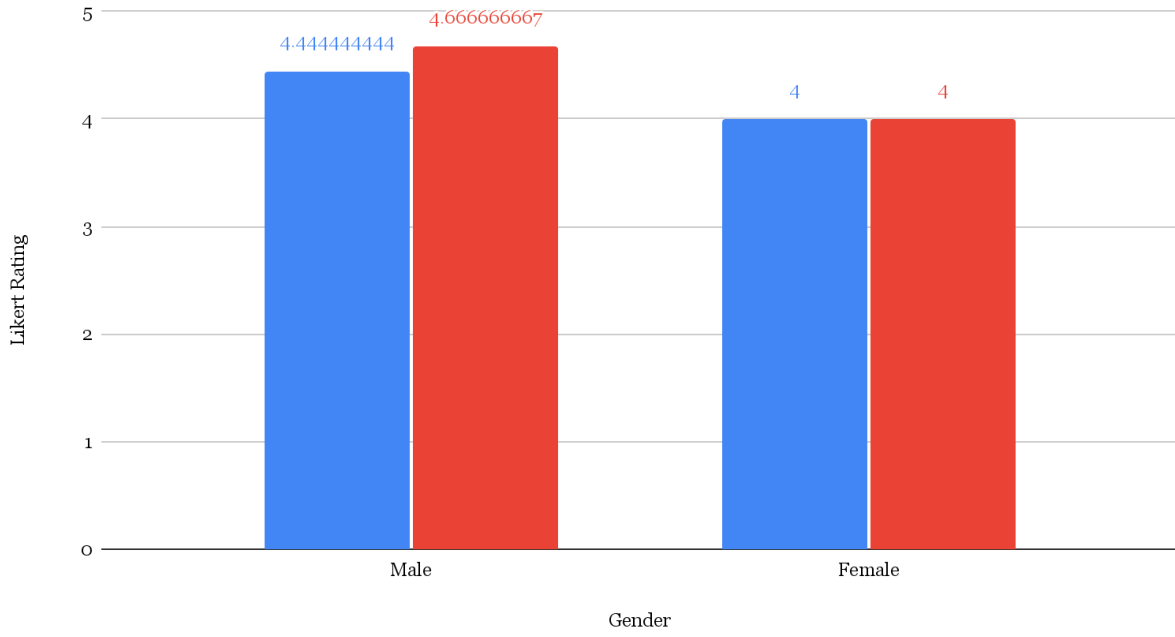
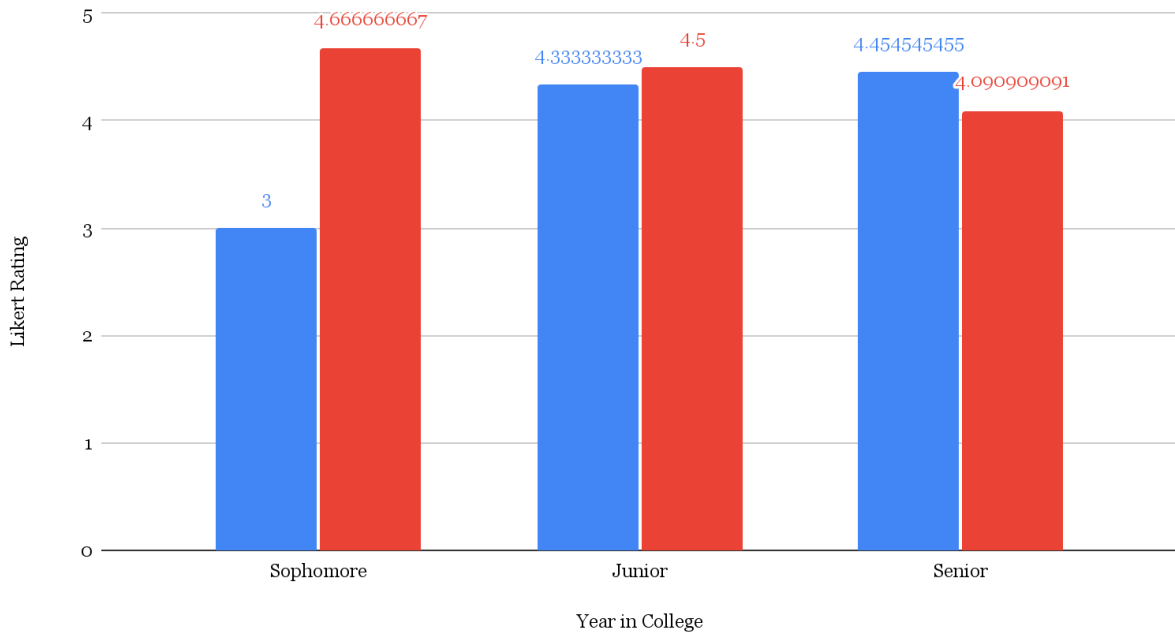


Figure 2B



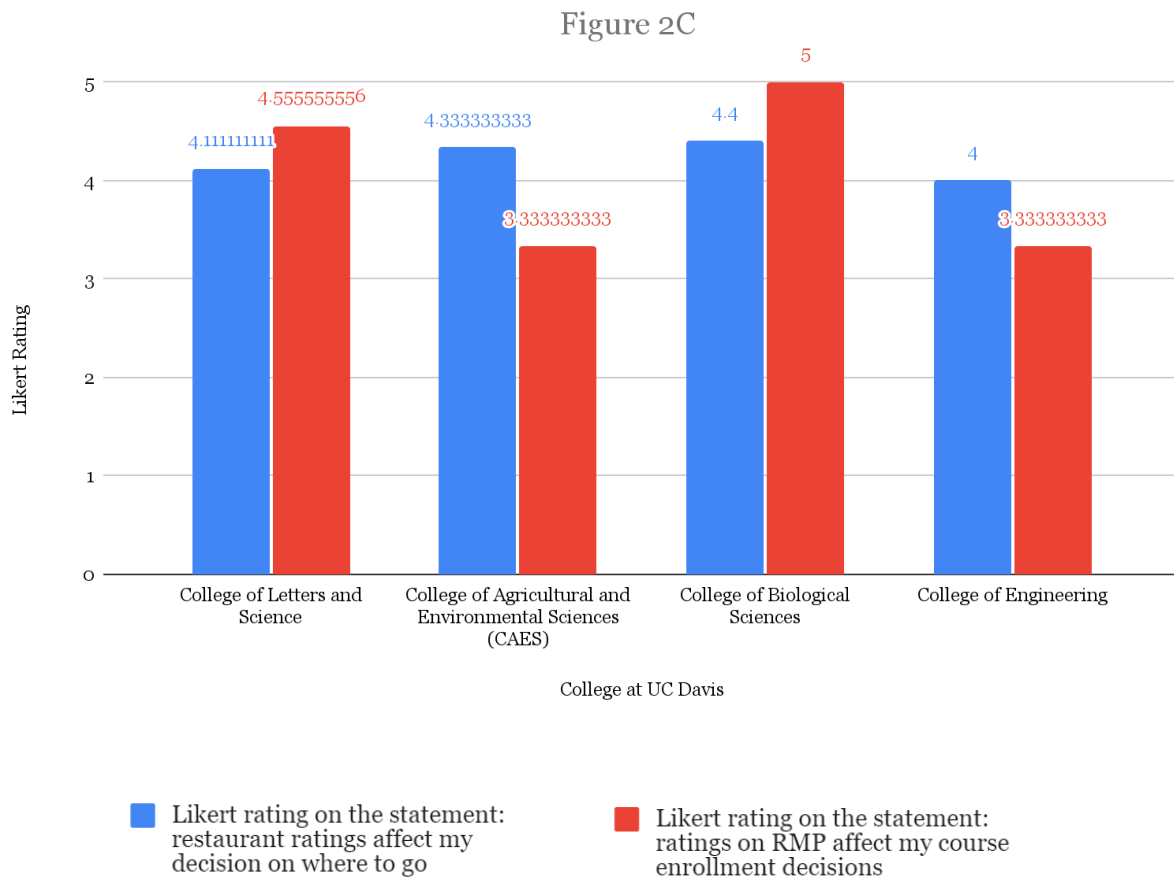


Figure 2. Opinion of impact of ratings on decisions by the following demographics: **(a)** By gender. **(b)** by year in college. **(c)** by UC Davis college.

Participants of the study believed that ratings impacted their decisions overall, but with slight differences (Figure 2). For example, males of this study utilized ratings more often than females to make decisions (Figure 2A), but both genders agreed that ratings should be taken into consideration. This perspective transitions as participants go through college, with the impact of ratings on decisions increasing for restaurant ratings and decreasing for RMP ratings (Figure 2B). Different UC Davis colleges had varying responses (Figure 2C). By far, the College of Biological Sciences takes into consideration ratings more than the other colleges in both categories. Interestingly, participants of the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences

and the College of Engineering reported that the rating of restaurants has more impact on them than RMP ratings.

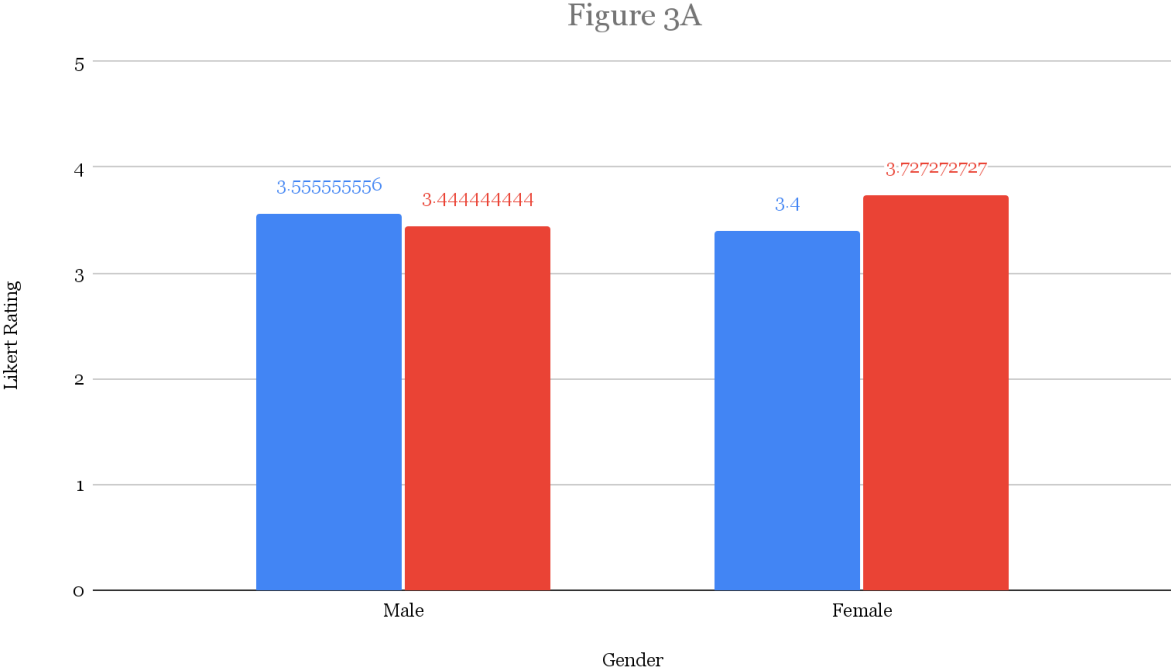


Figure 3B

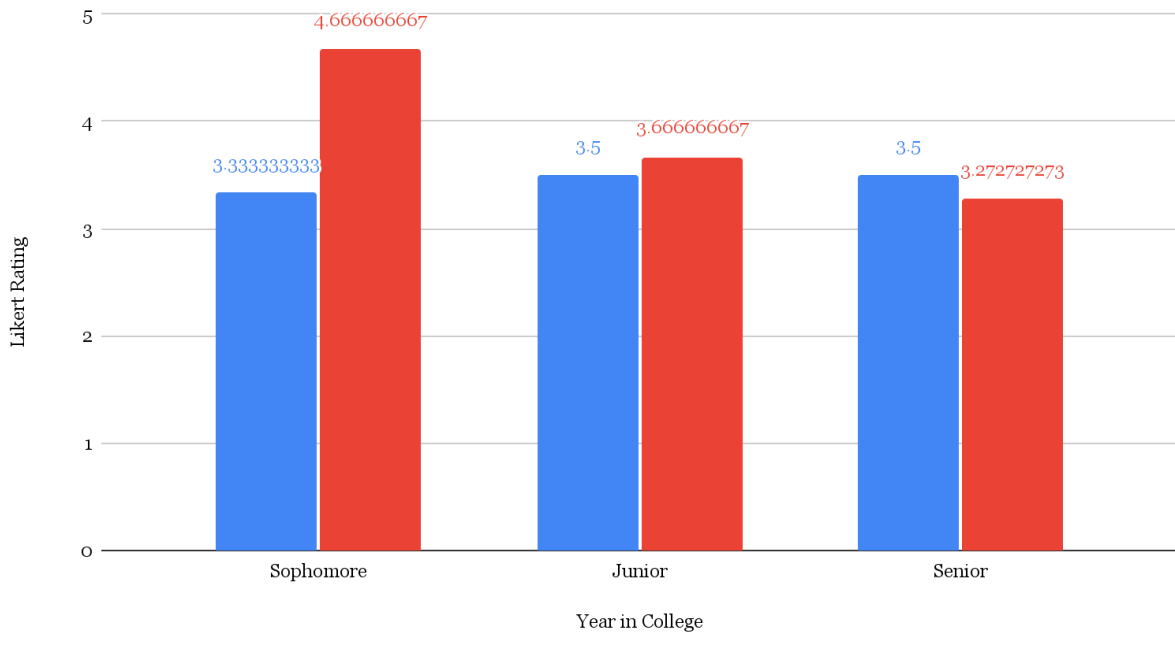


Figure 3C

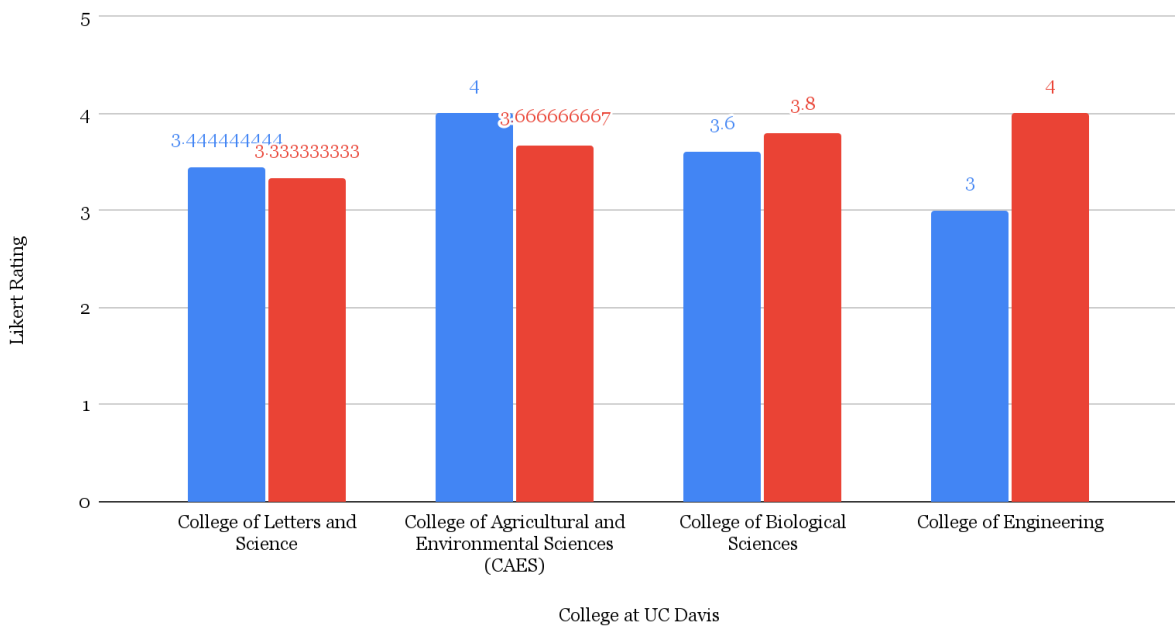




Figure 3. Opinion of impact of ratings on decisions due to lack of choices by the following demographics: **(a)** by gender. **(b)** by year in college. **(c)** by UC Davis college.

The lack of options affects the significance of ratings (Figure 3). By gender, the participants agree that lack of options slightly lessens the impact of ratings on both restaurants and RMP (Figure 3A). However, the lack of options lessens the impact of RMP ratings less and less as they go through college (Figure 3B) while the lack of options on restaurant ratings stayed roughly the same. Different UC Davis colleges had varying responses once again (Figure 3C). Interestingly, students of the College of Letters and Science and College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences reported that lack of restaurant choices impacts the significance of ratings more than the lack of classes.

Open-ended question responses

Open ended question responses varied in regard to their opinion on whether the ratings are ever wrong. Of the 20 participants, the participants that did not respond to whether or not the ratings had ever betrayed their expectations had a slightly lower likert rating, with the same parameters as mentioned in “Results”. On the statement that corresponds with the impact of RMP ratings on course registration decisions, average likert-scale rating for people who responded vs people who didn’t was 4 vs 4.538; on the statement that corresponds with the impact of lack of choices on significance of RMP ratings, average likert-scale rating for people who responded vs people who didn’t was 3.286 vs 3.769. This showed that people who agreed

more with the idea that RMP ratings and lack of choices affected their decisions, had their expectations betrayed more often.

For the participants that responded to the open-ended question responses, there were a few key themes. The first theme is that the number of reviews affects the validity and significance of the rating of RMP. For instance, participant 11 explains that “usually the reviews are accurate if there are a large number of reviews” and participant 10 stated that his expectations were betrayed “one time but it was because there was a low sample size”. This demonstrates that students believe that the more ratings there are, the more significant the rating is.

Another theme is that the classes sometimes betray their expectations in a positive way. Participants 6, 9, and 11 share similar conclusions that the professor is sometimes not as bad as they expect, especially those with only bad ratings on occasion.

Contrary to that, there are classes that betray their expectations in a negative way. Participants 9 and 13 share that sometimes they feel that professors with really good reviews end up a bit false, and that it may be due to personal preferences.

Of course, there are those such as participants 14 and 18 that state that RMP is accurate. However, they also explain that sometimes it doesn't matter because there will always be professors that you just can't avoid, especially if they are the only professor offering a course for a particular quarter.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results, it would seem that even though the impact diminishes as students go through college, **RMP ratings can still give particular insights** and warn students away from certain classes, such as for general education classes, so they are **still worth consideration**. In

“deciding which general ed courses [they] should take, [they] will look at RMP to decide. If they have low ratings, [they] will avoid that class entirely” (participant 4). Other times, students will “still take the class if [they] like the time/schedule of the class” (participant 3), meaning that the lack of variety diminishes the significance of the RMP rating.

This study’s findings support previous studies done on this subject, which are slightly dated. More specifically, this study agrees that RMP is a **valid source of information** to be used in academic decision making (Boswell) since the majority of participants stated the significance of RMP in their decisions, and that “RMP ratings **cannot be dismissed as invalid rants** of a few disgruntled students” (Timmerman 60), especially in cases with larger review sizes.

However, data of this study needs to be taken with a grain of salt due to several limitations. First, due to time constraints, there could only be 20 participants, which is a small sample size. This means that there could be **no statistically significant data** from this study which will be able to produce a generalization for college students, or even just particularly UC Davis students. Second, not everyone was able to be represented. This is due to the timing of the study, which was conducted during Summer Session 1 of year 2023. At this time, the freshmen are not officially freshmen yet, so there is no representation in that department, and the seniors that graduated do not count as current UCD undergraduate students, so there is no representation there either.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, RMP ratings are worth consideration during course enrollment for students of UC Davis. But, my study concludes that the ratings need to be examined closely when used because the classes may turn out differently than expected, and that in some cases the

ratings are irrelevant due to lack of choices, which is something that isn't studied in previous work. Future directions for this field can aim to focus on the fixing of evaluation or course registration systems so that the two mechanisms can work together to provide better information to students. Further research for this specific study should be conducted to have a more controlled environment and be done at a time that can result in a better representation of undergraduate students at universities to see how the impact of RMP has changed throughout the years.

Works Cited

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