Blackbear Square

Rate, Search and Discover Courses; for Students, by Students

## Team Egg

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# Problem

Students often lack the information and skills to choose classes that teach interesting material in a way that is well received given what they know, their other time commitments, and what teaching strategies work best for them. It’s difficult for a student to walk into an elective they don't know much about. It’s possible to find themselves committing to the course and credits, then wanting to drop when they realize the course is far more complicated, overwhelming, or subject matter not suited to their learning style (online classes, synchronous, asynchronous, etc).

Dropping courses can lead to severe consequences such as;

* Losing a scholarship that requires you take a certain number of credit hours if you are unable to replace the dropped course due to class availability or scheduling conflict.
* Losing money spent on the course if dropped after the refund date.
* A black mark on your GPA if dropped with a withdrawal-fail.
* Falling behind on your degree and needing to make it up on a later semester or be forced to take another semester before graduating.

To make well informed decisions, a student could find another student like them who took the class, but existing solutions don’t facilitate that. Advisors give out advice regarding course loads and descriptions but they can only offer their perspective from an advisor or instructor position which can be insufficient for the specific student’s needs. How can we build a reliable and organized student-led knowledge-base regarding difficulty, pacing, work load, enjoyment, and relevancy to solve hesitancy students are experiencing when picking initial courses?

# Prior Solutions

## Solution 1: Rate my Professor

Rate My Professor is a website which takes student feedback regarding their professor anonymously so that students can give their honest opinion. Professors can use this as a resource to improve or change the way which they conduct their courses. Students alternatively can use it as a resource to avoid professors with low ratings or search for those with high ratings.

Black Bear Square takes a different approach to this as it focuses on the course aspects rather than the professor. A review system focused on the class will provide a better framework for students that have questions not just about the professor, but the curriculum covered and environment of the course (which will in-turn help them come to a course decision they’re more happy with). It’s important to note that our focus is on a standardized, category rating system. followed by an individual commented experience if the user so pleases. Rate my professor has the option to give a one through five rating on the given professor as well as 6 questions. Our goal is to present the user with a similar option but with questions that are better suited for criticizing the course rather than the professor. For example, where Rate my Professor asks “would you take this professor again?”, Black Bear Square would ask something along the lines of “would you take this course again”.

## Solution 2: Rate my Courses.io

Rate My Courses is a web application that allows users to read and write reviews for classes from different universities. Users can search for a specific school and then filter the class results from that school based on department and class level. After selecting a course, users have the option to leave a review that includes course comments, advice, and ratings on difficulty, interest, usefulness, etc.

Blackbear Square will be different from Rate My Courses mainly because our application is intended to have a stronger collaboration and discussion component. An example of this is that Blackbear Square will allow users to leave a review while still taking the class and then potentially updating their review based on the rest of their experience at the end of the semester. While the Rate My Courses site allows users to post reviews for classes, there isn't an option to comment or have conversations with students about the class. The ability to speak personally with students who have taken the class is more valuable than simply reading a review. Also, Blackbear Square is intended to start off on a smaller, more local scale but the Rate My Courses app allows for course reviews at hundreds of universities.

## Solution 3: UMaine student survey

On the UMaine portal, students leave feedback of their class through a series of surveys at the end of each semester with various degrees of anonymity. Once enough time has passed, instructors and administrators can access the statistics of the surveys as well as any comment left by students on the survey.

The Blackbear Square app will mainly differ based on who the target audience is. The UMaine survey is designed for the students to take and instructors to view, Blackbear Square will expect and tailor the experience with the idea that students will also be the main end-user when viewing the result of surveys. By tailoring the experience for the students instead of the teachers, students can use the service to glean helpful opinions that they can act on to improve their choice in courses. Various aspects will reflect this such as availability (reviews can be read by anyone), letting students leave a review at any point in the class (instead of just the end), and additional focus on getting opinions on things such as enjoyment and workload.

# Blackbear Square

BlackBearSquare will serve as an accessible resource for all students looking to rate, search and discover courses at their given universities. Students may find it useful to read the opinions of their peers who’ve already experienced the course. Such reviews will range from completely anonymous to allowing users to leave personally identifiable information such as their grade, sex, and overall workload. Users who are looking to rate courses will answer a baseline grading criteria form, followed by an individual response providing personalized details the student wishes to share.

On the UMaine survey system, the only users that can access the information are the instructors/administrators assigned to the course. That sort of exchange of information causes two problems. First, the sample size is extremely small so students can’t really expect much anonymity when an instructor can pick them out based on their comments on the course. This problem will lead to less than honest reviews. Second, other prospective students can’t directly gain knowledge from these reviews. They’re not accessible by them at all. Blackbear Square reviews will be accessible by anyone whether they are logged in or not.

Course reviews are anonymous so that students will feel safe giving their honest opinion on their courses and the professors that teach them. To mitigate reliability issues that revolve around anonymous reviewing, course reviews can be sorted into registered and unregistered users. This is to give additional confidence to registered reviews and to take unregistered reviews with a grain of salt if it sounds like it’s unreliable. However, whether the account is registered or unregistered, the review will still remain anonymous.

Where the Rate My professor focuses on rating the instructor, Blackbear Square will focus on rating the classes. A student looking for a course is not going to immediately know who the professors are to watch out for or see how they behave, they’re only interested in what a specific class is like.

Users will be given the option to state the name of their professor in their course review, but also have the option to leave it blank. Students may find more comfort in anonymity, specifically when it comes to pointing fingers. Conversely, having the option to include their professor's name could help in instances where the user believed the professor's personality influenced the difficulty of the course.

Users can either manually search for courses on their University’s page or they can set filters to show courses from only a specific major or professor name. While the default option is to show reviews based on course, having an additional option to sort by professor can allow a student to see if that professor simply does not have a good teaching style for that class compared to other classes they teach.