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A website that encourages students to rate USM professors has no problem admitting its level of legitimacy -- absolutely none. "(The site) is no different than people talking on a street corner when it comes to the validity of the information contained within," said Brian Roscher, system administrator of www.virtualratings.com in an e-mail interview. "It is street talk, and it will contain everything from the very best to the very worst examples of freedom of speech." This has some professors questioning the site's purpose.

"What is the point of this?" said Christine Holden, associate professor of history. "It seems to me that it's not a very useful thing." Although Holden agrees that students have a right to their opinions, she is disappointed that the site's managers have made no attempt to verify whether the people posting ratings have even taken a class. Roscher admitted that all the information provided is decided unconditionally by the students. "I have faith in people and believe that the vast majority of ratings will be sincere," he said.

"Free speech is good," said Erica Essman, a senior psychology major. "Some people would want to know if they should avoid certain teachers." Essman, however, does not see herself placing stock in one person's Internet opinion.

"At a commuter school like USM, the Internet might replace the informal grapevine assessments that circulate among students on campus," said Kathleen Ashley, professor of English.

Both Ashley and Holden were listed on the site. As of Friday, neither had been rated.

"I'm massively intrigued," Ashley said. "It's nice to know I'm going to be virtually rated by someone."

The website, created last September by students for students, contains a number of colleges across the country including USM. As of Friday, 12 USM professors were listed, most of whom had an 'A' rating. According to Roscher, average ratings are high. "There is no role model like a great teacher," he said. "Excellent teachers can motivate their students to better themselves."

Roscher, however, sees why a negative rating may hurt. "Egos and freedom of speech do not mix well," he said.

"It's a little blow to the esteem," Essman agreed.

Roscher said that awards are given to the highest rated professors at each school twice a year: on Dec. 25 and June 25. USM is a new addition, so professors will not see the verdict until June. Professors' names will not be removed unless student comments are deemed libelous.

"(The site) is a forum where free speech reigns," Roscher said. "Removal would mean that the site would be censored."