



Administering Student Course Evaluations Online

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I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge:

Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:

Administrative Processes:

- *Do institutions administer student course evaluations electronically?*
- *How often are student online evaluations (both for online courses and face-to-face courses) administered? Do institutions use both formative and summative course evaluations?*
- *How much time are students allocated to complete evaluations?*
- *What are typical student response rates for online course evaluations?*
- *How are students incentivized to complete evaluations?*

Evaluation Content

- *What content areas do online student course evaluations primarily assess?*
- *How do institutions specifically assess the unique dimensions of distance-learning courses through online student course evaluations (e.g., wikis, blogs, software, etc.)?*

Project Sources:

- Education Advisory Board’s internal and online (www.educationadvisoryboard.com) research libraries
- *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- Analysis of Online Course Evaluation Data from Select Semesters (2009-2010), Prepared for the Committee on Faculty Affairs of the University Faculty Senate, University A.

Research Parameters:

Per the requesting member’s guidelines, the Council targeted its outreach to institutions that administer online course evaluations online.

| A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Institution | Location | Enrollment (Total / Undergraduate) | Classification |
| University A | Mid-Atlantic Small City | 45,200 / 38,600 | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University B | Montreal, Quebec Large City | 36,500 / 21,500 | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University C | South Distant Town | 23,000 / 18,000 | Research Universities (high research activity) |
| University D | South Large City | 40,000 / 30,500 | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University E | Mid-Atlantic Large Suburb | 37,200 / 26,500 | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University F | South Small City | 20,700 / 17,600 | Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs) |

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Observations:

- ❖ **Several contact institutions have recently transitioned from administering paper course evaluations to an online process.** Institutions cite a number of reasons for the decision to move the student course evaluation process online, including more thorough qualitative feedback from students and a less time consuming administrative process.
- ❖ **Transitioning to an online student course evaluation process usually entails careful planning, involving faculty, students and staff.** Contacts encourage course administrators to include all major institutional stakeholders in the transition process in order to attract support for the online system and to address concerns about the validity of the online delivery mechanism.
- ❖ **Apart from those questions that refer specifically to an instructor's presence in class or an instructor's interpersonal communication with students, contacts report no significant differences between the content for evaluations administered to students in traditional classes and those completed for online classes.** Additionally, evaluation administrators tend to leave the content of a course evaluation unchanged during the transition from a paper-administered evaluation system to online course evaluations.
- ❖ **Online course evaluations usually comprise both quantitative scale ratings and qualitative, free-response questions.** Both categories of responses may be used in promotion and tenure discussions to a varying degree, though use of quantitative scale ratings is more common.
- ❖ **One of the major concerns associated with online course evaluations is their tendency to receive lower response rates.** Contact institutions recommend several strategies to improve response rates that both engage students in the course evaluation discussion and reward them for their participation in the process, including leveraging faculty to encourage student participation, sending e-mail reminders, publishing instructor ratings, and providing registration advantages to students who complete online evaluations.

III. OVERVIEW

The majority of contact institutions administer student course evaluations online for both online and in-person courses. However, two institutions, **University F** and **University C**, administer course evaluations online for online courses only while maintaining paper evaluations for in-person classes. Response rates for online evaluations range from 15% to 66%, compared to between 80% and 90% for paper evaluations.

The student course evaluation process is typically housed within academic affairs, information technology (IT) services, and the office of institutional research and assessment; typically IT builds and develops the evaluation tool, the office of institutional research analyzes response data, and academic affairs creates evaluation content and uses feedback to improve teaching quality or as part of the faculty promotion and tenure process.

| Institution | Evaluation Format | | Duration for Evaluation Submissions | Response Rates | Division that Administers Course Evaluation |
|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| | Online Courses | In-person course | | | |
| University A | Online | Online | Proportional to length of class (one business day allotted for each week of class) | 58-66% | Institute for Teaching Excellence |
| University B | No online courses offered | Online | 3-3.5 weeks | 50% | Started as an initiative through the chief information officer's office. Currently operated and maintained under teaching and learning services in academic affairs. |
| University C | Online | Paper | 2 weeks | Not available | Academic Affairs |
| University D | Online | Online (started this fall) | Proportional to length of class (3 weeks for regular classes, less time for shorter classes.) | Not available | Partnership between IT and academic affairs |
| University E | Online | Online | 2 weeks | 63% | Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment |
| University F | Online | Paper | 10 -21 days | Online: 15% Paper: 80 – 90% | Office of Institutional Research |

IV. TRANSITIONING STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS ONLINE

Initiating the Move to Online Course Evaluations

Contacts report a general trend in higher education towards moving course evaluations online. Even contact institutions still operating paper evaluations for in-person courses admit exploring their options online. Contacts cite several reasons for the transition from paper to online evaluations at many institutions. Though these advantages are largely related to the more efficient evaluation process, online administered course evaluations are also reported to improve evaluation content.

Increasing Administrative Efficiency

Paper Evaluations – Less Teaching Time
Professors have to cede an adequate amount of class time to administer paper course evaluations and to allow students to write significant feedback. Contacts report that the time allotted to completing evaluations at the end of each semester could be better apportioned to additional teaching or exam revision.

Online Evaluations – More Completion Time
Online evaluations eliminate the need for instructors to sacrifice class time for evaluation purposes. Students usually have several days outside class time to complete online course evaluations, allowing the instructor to fully utilize class time.

Paper Evaluations – Delay in Delivering Feedback
Contacts report that paper evaluations require significant investment in human and administrative resources. Support staff spend several weeks transcribing students' handwritten responses, tabulating and graphing data, and returning feedback to instructors. As a result, instructors receive evaluation feedback several weeks or months after the course, giving them little opportunity to use student feedback formatively in improving their pedagogical style and course content.

Online Evaluations – Quick Feedback
With online course evaluations, instructors are typically provided with evaluation results within a few weeks of the evaluations, soon after final grades are posted. Professors are able to study responses and incorporate needed changes in the next semester's class. Consequently, student evaluations may be used as a useful resource in faculty development rather than serving exclusively as a resource for tenure and promotions decisions.

Paper Evaluations – Waste of Paper
Contacts report that administering paper course evaluations requires a substantial amount of paper resources. Contacts at **University A** indicate that prior to transitioning to an online evaluation system, the institution processed 350,000 evaluations, amounting to three million forms each semester, and raising both financial and environmental concerns.

Online Evaluations – Paper Conservation
Contacts recommend administering course evaluations online especially for institutions committed to environmental conservation and maintaining lower operational costs. Although establishing an online course evaluation system may require an initially significant financial investment, contacts indicate that maintenance costs are much lower in the long run.

IV. TRANSITIONING STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS ONLINE

Improving Evaluation Quality

Paper Evaluations - Less Time to Submit Detailed Feedback

Some contact institutions report that given the limited time available to complete paper evaluations in class, students' responses tend to lack depth and may be less helpful for use in faculty teaching development and course improvement.

Online Evaluations – Detailed Feedback from Students

A number of contacts suggest that the extended time period available to students to complete online course evaluations creates an opportunity for students to invest adequate time to construct thoughtful and thorough responses to evaluation questions. Other contacts, however, argue that students struggle to prioritize completing course evaluations on their own time and may still rush through the process despite the extended response time period.

Paper Evaluations - Potentially Inconsistent

Paper-based course evaluations can be potentially inconsistent because they are typically administered by individual departments across an institution. At the **University E**, for instance, prior to adopting an online course evaluation system, evaluations were administered in such a decentralized way that paper course evaluations differed between individual instructors within a department. This system allowed for little comparison of faculty performance across an institution or even within departments

Online Evaluations – Standardized Streamlined Assessment

Online course evaluations tend to be centrally administered, albeit with the opportunity for departmental specialization in some cases. Standardizing course evaluations allows academic leadership to acquire a holistic picture of faculty performance across an institution. Though some contacts discourage institution-wide, faculty-performance-comparisons, online evaluations afford a quick efficient way to monitor the general standards of teaching effectiveness across an institution.

IV. TRANSITIONING STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS ONLINE

Planning Logistics

Encouraging Participation

Contact institutions typically enlist the support of all university stakeholders when considering the move from paper course evaluations to an online evaluation system. At **University A** for example, the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs commissioned an online Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness (SRTE) committee to investigate the viability of moving course evaluations online. The committee included faculty, students, administrators, and measurement and technical professionals. This committee was charged with investigating a variety of

issues, including commercial software, online administration of course evaluations at other universities and the implications of a move to an online format for faculty and students at University A.

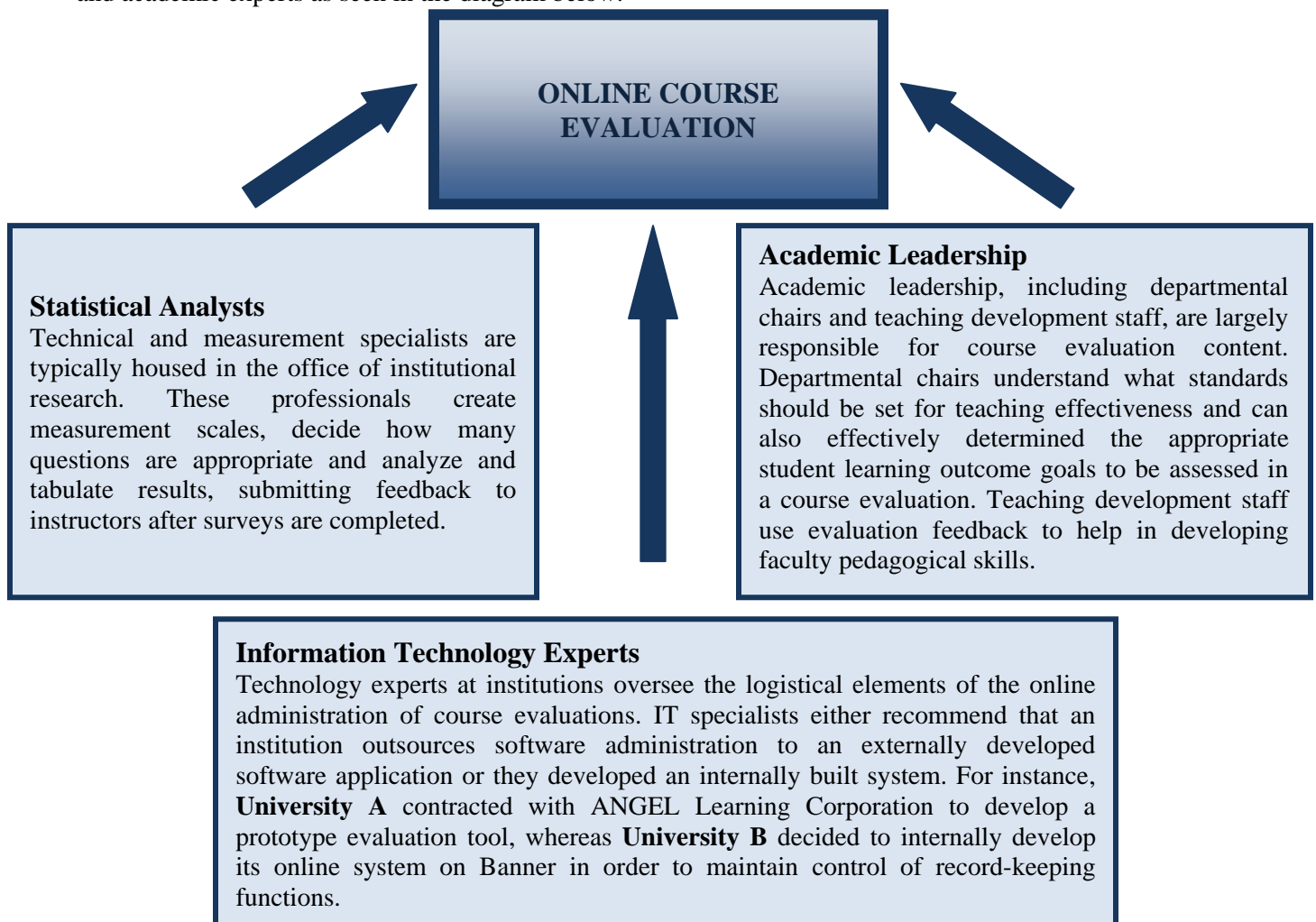
Similarly, at **University B**, the office of teaching and learning services made a conscious effort to openly communicate with faculty and students at the onset of the online evaluation system's creation. Leadership at the teaching and learning services office attended all staff meetings and student group meetings to solicit questions about the move to the online evaluation system.

It is crucial to obtain and maintain staff and student buy-in. It helps to involve both parties at the beginning of the online process to ensure that their concerns and questions are addressed

- Council Interview

Housing Course Evaluation Administration – Combining Resources across Three Teams

Contacts report that online course evaluations are usually administered by a team of technical, measurement and academic experts as seen in the diagram below.



IV. TRANSITIONING STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS ONLINE

Creating Content

Contacts detail the two primary dimensions to examining the content of online course evaluation as:

- (a) How evaluation content differs between online courses and in-person courses.
- (b) How content differs between paper-administered evaluations and online-administered evaluations for both types of courses.

Examining Differences in Evaluation Content

Contrasting the Content in Paper Evaluations with Online Evaluations

Most contact institutions assert that moving from a paper to an online course evaluation system does not typically involve significant changes in the evaluation content. In fact, **University B** maintains identical evaluation content in the paper and online version of the evaluation, a choice specifically intended to minimize faculty hesitance and skepticism towards the online system.

One exception is the **University E**, where contacts note that making the move from paper evaluations to administering course evaluations online can lead to a fairly significant difference in evaluation content. Due to the inability of the university's online course evaluation system to accommodate department-specific questions, the University E has standardized evaluations across the institution. Contacts note that losing the specialized feature of evaluations is one of the major points of contention that faculty have with the online system.

Though online course evaluations and paper evaluations share similar content, online evaluations typically contain a much longer list of questions due to an online systems' ability to accommodate more content. Nevertheless, contacts at the **University C** advise against long evaluations, stating that they promote survey fatigue and discourage student responses.

Contrasting Content on Online Evaluations for both In-Person and Online Courses

Contacts note that there are no major content differences between online course evaluations administered for in-person classes and those that evaluate online classes, apart from those questions that specifically refer to an instructor's presence in class. For example, contacts at **University F** observe that though online professors cannot be evaluated on promptly arriving in class or assigning adequate office hours to their students, their counterparts who teach in-person courses are evaluated on these metrics. However, aside from such minor differences, evaluations for both in-person and online course similarly assess an instructor's efficiency in relaying course content, an instructor's ability to engage students' interest and the course content's rigor and relevance to students.

IV. TRANSITIONING STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS ONLINE

Formatting Evaluation Content

Evaluating Teaching and Course Content

Contacts stress the need to rate an instructor's teaching effectiveness, course content, and student learning outcomes separately. Contacts at **University C** indicate that making this distinction helps elicit objective feedback from students rather than personal attacks on faculty.

Types of Evaluation Questions

Across contact institutions, online course evaluations typically have both quantitative scale ratings and qualitative free-response questions.

☞ *Quantitative Scale Ratings*

Scale ratings seek to place a numerical value on instructor and course effectiveness by rating students agreement or disagreement with descriptive statements about a course or instructor. The numerical value that quantitative scale ratings provide is especially useful in promotion and tenure decisions because they present department chairs with tangible benchmarks by which to assess instructor performance. Contacts report that the quantitative portion of course evaluations typically consists of two sections: a section containing a few core questions about the instructor and the course that is administered across an institution on all evaluations and a second section covering department-specific questions about the course and instructor.

At both **University B** and **University A**, evaluations have four core questions that are identical across academic units. However, while University A offers departments the opportunity to pick 15 questions out of a pool of 117 department-specific questions, **University B** gives complete ownership to department chairs to create department-specific questions.

☞ *Qualitative Free-Response Questions*

Contacts report that qualitative or free-response questions are placed in evaluations to provide students with the opportunity to provide more anecdotal feedback about courses; students may openly express what specifically aided or impeded learning in a given course. Contacts at the **University E** report a general trend for course evaluations across higher education institutions to focus more on student learning outcomes; free-response questions provide an excellent format to evaluate learning outcomes.

The majority of institutions use qualitative feedback primarily for instructors' pedagogical development, though a few contact institutions report also including qualitative feedback in promotion and tenure decisions. Contacts at the **University D** advocate for a consistent approach, insisting that whether or not both quantitative and qualitative feedback are used in promotion and tenure decisions may not be particularly significant once the chosen practice is consistent across an institution.

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Implementing Online Course Evaluations

Even after carefully planning logistics and formatting the content of online course evaluations, contacts report that implementing online course evaluations typically takes a number of semesters or years. Most contact institutions complete three primary stages during the implementation process: a pilot or test stage, a phased implementation stage, and then comprehensive implementation and ongoing training of faculty and staff to ease the transition process.



Pilot Programming

Prior to implementing an online course evaluation system, some institutions encouraged a small number of administrative units to volunteer to participate in a pilot program for testing purposes. **University A** implemented a 3-year pilot program with ANGEL Learning Corporation, including of 190 course sections to test the feasibility of an online evaluation system. This pilot was later expanded to become the current online evaluation system after adding and adjusting functionality and addressing technical issues.

Phased Implementation

After successfully testing an online evaluation systems' capacity to perform, most institutions embark on a phased implementation process, converting small batches of academic units to the online system at a time. The **University D**, for example, began operating its online evaluation system with only four out of seventeen colleges. After each semester, technical and data analysis made adjustments to the systems functionality and addressed concerns raised by faculty and students, including technical updates in time for the next batch of academic units to participate the following semester.

Training Faculty and Staff

Contacts stress the importance of providing ongoing training opportunities for faculty and staff after implementing an online evaluation system. At **University A**, online training materials are provided to ease the the transition process for faculty and staff.

V. ADDRESSING CONCERNS WITH ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

Addressing Faculty Misconceptions

All contacts indicate that although faculty are generally hesitant toward course evaluation as a whole, they are especially concerned about online administered student course evaluations. Faculty cite three key concerns about online course evaluations: non-response bias, low average ratings and low response rates. Contacts stress that tackling faculty misconceptions is crucial to the success of an online course evaluation system.

Non-Response Bias

Misconception:

Faculty worry that that as a result of the relatively lower online response rates in comparison to paper evaluations, online course evaluations may not capture a representative sample of students. Faculty fear that student ratings may differ significantly between those students who choose to respond and those who do not, skewing evaluations results.

Clarifying Facts:

Though contacts acknowledge the bias that non-responding students could cause in evaluation results, contacts note that non-response bias is not exclusive to online-administered course evaluations. In fact, paper evaluations, which are administered on a single day, eliminate the responses of all students who happen to miss that particular class. Contacts at the **University E** observe that online course evaluations may actually capture a more representative sample of students as a result of the longer time allotted for evaluation completion.

Low Average Ratings

Misconception:

Contacts at **University A** report faculty concerns about lower average ratings on online course evaluations since all enrolled students, including those who do not regularly attend class, have the opportunity to submit an online evaluation. With paper evaluations, only students who are present in class can submit an evaluation; faculty believe that students who regularly attend class tend to be more actively engaged and are more likely to submit an objective evaluation than those who attend class infrequently.

Clarifying facts:

Contacts suggest that faculty often acquire concerns about online course evaluations anecdotally, through colleagues at institutions that administer online course evaluations and not through verified facts. Consequently, educating faculty on evaluation and assessment research that disproves a direct relationship between lower average ratings on evaluations and the online delivery mechanism is recommended. Contacts at **University A** cite a Webster, Benton, and Gross (2010) study based on IDEA Center's online student ratings system, which proves that there are no significant differences between student ratings delivered online and those submitted on paper.

V. ADDRESSING CONCERNS WITH ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

Low Response Rates

Misconception:

Although contacts acknowledge that online evaluations tend to have lower response rates, they stress that lower response rates are neither a direct result of the online delivery mechanism nor do they denote that feedback from online course evaluations is completely unreliable.

Clarifying facts:

Most contacts agree that ultimately, students' willingness to complete online course evaluations is more closely related to faculty effectiveness in communicating the importance of evaluations to students than to the online delivery mechanism. Efforts to improve faculty engagement with the evaluation process are on page 15.

Contacts at the **University D** report that in one academic unit, response rates were kept stable despite moving from paper course evaluations to online evaluations because of the level of student engagement present in that unit.

Additionally, contacts at **University A** and the **University E** emphasize the utility of information gathered from evaluations, even when response rates are lower online than on paper. Both University A and the University E conducted careful statistical analysis of course evaluation feedback gathered from paper evaluations and information received from online evaluations, noting that scores and feedback content from both evaluations were minimally explained by response rates.

V. ADDRESSING CONCERNS WITH ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

Increasing Response Rates for Online Course Evaluations

Useful strategies to Increase Response

Despite studies which prove the minimal effect response rates have on the quality of information online evaluation ratings provide, contacts are still concerned about increasing student response rates in order to gather evaluations that are more representative of the student population. Contacts have employed strategies that both engage and incentivize students to complete online course evaluations.

Engaging Students

Contacts record the most success in increasing response rates for online course evaluations when students are actively educated on the relevance of student course evaluations. Contacts consider this approach more sustainable than continuously incentivizing students.

Leverage Faculty to Encourage Student Participation

All contacts agree that response rates for online course evaluations are highest for courses where instructors are intentional about communicating the importance of evaluations to students. Contacts note that students are likely to avoid completing evaluations when they do not believe faculty read or use evaluation feedback. Faculty who encourage students to fill in evaluations and explain to students how they have incorporated feedback from past evaluations into their class format and content are often those whose courses record the highest response rates. In fact, at **University A**, academic leadership encourages those faculty members with the highest response rates to educate their colleagues on how best to prompt students to complete evaluations.

Increase Student Awareness of Online Course Evaluations through Student Groups

At some contact institutions, such as the **University D** and **University B**, academic leadership has made efforts to strengthen outreach to students about online course evaluations. At **University B**, reaching out to student groups about the importance of course evaluations has proved effective in spreading awareness across campus. Contacts report that at the beginning of the transition to an online platform, students were skeptical about the anonymity of the evaluation process but the student government association (SGA) worked together with academic leadership to assure students of the anonymity of online evaluations by having members of the SGA test the system.

At the **University D**, contacts are making an effort to change the campus culture toward course evaluation completion by presenting student course evaluations to incoming freshmen as integral to a student's responsibility at the **University D**.

Remind Students via Email

Most contact institutions send at least two e-mail reminders during the online course evaluation period. Contacts at **University B** note that response rates increase significantly after the provost sends an email to students reminding them of the importance of course evaluations in developing effective teaching practices.

However, contacts at the **University B**, caution against bombarding students with several e-mail reminders, stating that too many e-mails overwhelm students and can discourage them from completing evaluations.

V. ADDRESSING CONCERNS WITH ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

Adjust Allotted Time for Completing Evaluations

At **University B**, course evaluation administrators lengthened the allotted time given students to complete course evaluations in an attempt to include as many weekends as possible in the evaluation completion period, having observed an increase in responses during weekends. Contacts at University B also note that waiting to close the evaluations process until after students had completed exams positively affected response rates.

However, contacts at the **University B** caution against an extended evaluation period, especially when deadlines are set after the semester exam, in order to prevent the biased responses that students may adopt after completing the course exam and rather promote a holistic and objective assessment of the class.

Incentivizing Students to Complete Online Course Evaluations

Course evaluation administrators sometimes attempt to increase response rates for online course evaluations by rewarding students for their participation. Administrators publish instructor ratings, offer registration advantages or enroll participants in a raffle in an effort to encourage student participation.

Provide Students with Access to Instructor Ratings

At most contact institutions, instructor ratings are published to allow students the opportunity to review results when selecting courses each semester. However, due to faculty uneasiness about publicizing student ratings, institutions have developed innovative ways to address faculty concerns while still providing students with access to course evaluation results.

At the **University F** and the **University E** only certain evaluation content pre-approved by the student government association is made visible to students in their course selection process. Most of the quantitative data that is used for promotion and tenure decisions is kept private.

Likewise, at the **University E** administrators only publish instructor ratings for those courses with at least a 70% response rate, in attempt to appease faculty concerns regarding lower response rates for online course evaluations, as well as to encourage higher response rates from students.

Providing Registration Advantages and Other Awards to Students who Complete Online Evaluations

Contacts at certain institutions provide additional incentives for students who complete online course evaluations. In past years, leadership at the **University E** has awarded students who complete online evaluations with the highest priority during course registration. Contacts report that providing registration advantages did not sustain response rate improvements after the initial increase in participation rates from 61 percent to 66 percent during the first semester; response rates returned to 61 percent in subsequent semesters.

Contacts at the **University E** also report minimal success with prize incentives through raffle drawings; often students failed to pick up their prizes.

V. ADDRESSING CONCERNS WITH ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

Strategies to Avoid When Seeking to Increase Response

Contacts caution against making participation in student course evaluations a course requirement or offering extra credit for participation because of the strong bias in instructor ratings these initiatives may produce. Because faculty who provide grade-related incentives to their students may be misinterpreted as manipulative, contacts recommend that grades be solely based on evaluations of student performance and discourage assigning points or grades for compliance with evaluation completion requirements.

Likewise, contacts discourage institutions from mentioning the role student ratings play in decisions about faculty salary, promotion, or tenure, stating that this may encourage personal attacks against faculty via student course evaluation, rather than promote objective reflections on teaching effectiveness.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES NOTE

The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by the Advisory Board Company or its sources.

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