

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS FORUM



Student Course Evaluation Management and Application

Custom Research Brief

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October
2012

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I. Research Methodology

Project Challenge

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

- What is the process to conduct student course evaluations?
- What is the timeline to distribute and collect evaluations from students?
- Which office oversees student course evaluations?
- How is the content regulated across departments and colleges?
- What technologies do universities use in the student course evaluation process?
- How do administrators keep completed student course evaluations?
- Who has access to completed course evaluations?
- How do departments factor student course evaluations into promotion and tenure review?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- Advisory Board's internal and online research libraries (www.educationadvisoryboard.com)
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed academic administrators and provosts at private institutions.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

| Institution | Location | Type | Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total) | Classification |
|---------------|--------------|---------|--|--|
| University A | Mid-Atlantic | Private | 2,900 / 4,100 | Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs) |
| University B | Midwest | Private | 1,900 / 4,900 | Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs) |
| University C | South | Private | 2,500 / 4,200 | Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs) |
| University D* | South | Private | 3,800 / 6,200 | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University E* | Midwest | Private | 7,200 / 13,900 | Research Universities (very high research activity) |

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

*These interviews were conducted for previous Education Advisory Board research.



II. Executive Overview

Key Observations **Students complete online course evaluations at lower rates than paper course evaluations; therefore, provost office staff and individual faculty offer rewards and academic incentives to encourage student participation in evaluation process.** Strategies to increase the percentage of students who complete student course evaluations include raffles for money, electronics, and extra-credit; early access to final grades; charitable donations; and access to the final exam in return for a certificate of completion.

The provost and faculty senate at all institutions write a standard set of questions for undergraduate courses; at institutions with online delivery methods, faculty can add questions to reflect course structure or content. Individual faculty can customize online forms to evaluate course-specific format (e.g., lab sections, one-on-one music lessons, etc.) or content (e.g., texts, technology, specific assignments, etc.); and faculty can restrict department chairs from viewing answers to these customized questions. College deans and faculty determine student course evaluation questions for graduate students.

Deans, department chairs, and faculty review student course evaluations to inform tenure and promotion decisions and to recommend professional development training and workshops to faculty. Faculty members undergoing tenure review are responsible for providing summary reports (i.e., average responses for each question and overall course satisfaction) to review committee members. During the annual review process, department chairs note faculty with consistently low reviews in a specific area and recommend professional development.

The provost's office, dean's offices, department chairs, and individual faculty members store completed student course evaluations for at least ten years. At institutions with online storage, the office of academic administration, the dean's office, the department chair, and the faculty member evaluated have access to completed student course evaluations. At institutions with paper systems, offices receive student course evaluation summary reports, and the faculty member under review receives the original copies of evaluations with student comments.

Provost's offices collect and analyze course evaluations through software such as Banner, Qualtrix, Excel, and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). These software programs save resources to eliminate staff time spent on data entry and office supplies and compile summary reports for each course. Deans, department chairs, and faculty present the statistics (e.g., mean rating, standard deviations, etc.) these software programs produce during the tenure review process.

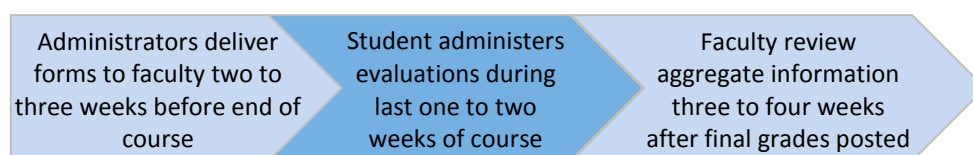
III. Process to Distribute and Collect Student Course Evaluations

Delivery Methods and Timeline

Students Complete Course Evaluations During Last Two Weeks of Semester Using Scannable Paper or Online Tools

Only students at **University A** complete the majority of course evaluations on paper, although contacts foresee a transition to an online system in the next five to 10 years. Administrators deliver the course evaluation forms to faculty two or three weeks before the semester ends. During the last one to two weeks of the course, instructor selects a student to distribute and collect the evaluations during course time. After the instructor selects the student, the instructor leaves the room and does not return until the selected student collects the completed forms and departs the classroom to deliver them to the dean's office. Academic administrators report ninety percent of students complete course evaluations.

Paper Evaluation Timeline

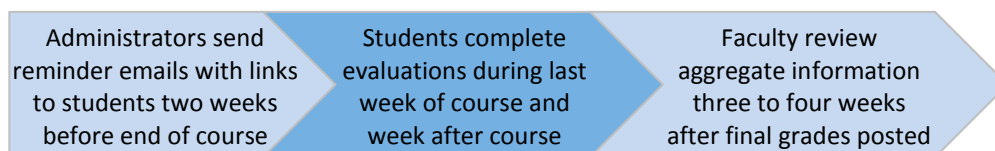


University B and **University D** both use an online system to deliver and collect student course evaluations. All students begin to receive automated emails from academic administrators two weeks before courses end with links to course evaluation forms, and many faculty deliver in-class reminders to complete the evaluations. At University B, student may complete the evaluations during the last week of a course and the week after a course completes. Contacts at both institutions acknowledge lower participation rates are a concern. At University D, 75 to 80 percent of students completed paper course evaluations; however, this rate has decreased since administrators implemented the online system. Although over 50 percent of students completed student evaluations the first year with the online system the percentage decreased in subsequent years.

Graduate Students Less Responsive to Emails

Contacts report graduate students are less responsive to automated email reminders to complete course evaluations, because their courses end at different times throughout the semester. Therefore, they do not develop the habit to complete evaluations at the end of the semester.

Online Evaluation Timeline

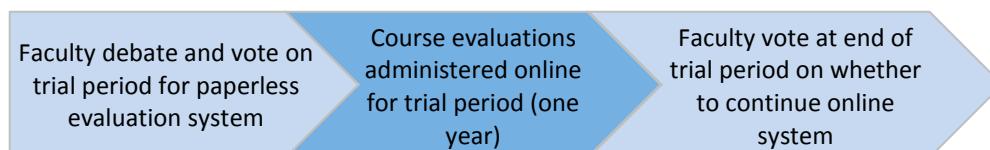


Transition to Paperless Collection

Administrators Transition to Online System Through Trial Period

Administrators at **University C** are piloting an online course evaluation system. In fall 2011, faculty began debating whether to transition to an online course evaluation system. At the end of the semester, the faculty senate voted in favor of a trial period for an online system evaluation system for courses in 2012. In the fall of 2012, they will vote on whether to continue with the online system or whether to revert to the paper system used previously. Faculty will not present data from the online evaluations collected during the trial period to tenure review committees. Additionally, student participation rate decreased from 75 to 80 percent to 60 to 65 percent completion after the switch to an online system.

Transition to Paperless Timeline at University C



Course Evaluation Oversight

Head of Academic Administration Oversees Process with Input from Faculty

At all institutions, the office for academic administration or faculty affairs manages the student course evaluation process. Staff in the provost's office work with the faculty senate and faculty committees to determine questions on student course evaluations. They also distribute paper evaluations to faculty and remind students to complete online evaluations.

Dean's offices and departments within individual colleges are responsible for analyzing and distributing completed evaluation forms. At **University A**, staff in the dean's office scans each paper evaluation. Administrators at **University A** and **University C** distribute paper copies of completed student course evaluation. The dean's office provides them to department chairs, who deliver them to individual faculty members. At institutions that are entirely paperless, deans, department chairs, and faculty can access all the student course evaluation data online.

At **University A**, centers for teaching help academic administrators during the beginning of the process to clear systems that receive scanned evaluations of previous data and enter the number of students enrolled in each course. However, at **University B**, the center for teaching structures faculty development trainings and workshops based on the outcome of evaluations. They also offer to meet with individual faculty to discuss how to customize student course evaluations to solicit the most helpful student feedback.

Course Evaluation Content

Provost's Office Standardizes Undergraduate Course Evaluations Across Colleges and Departments

The questions administered across courses at the undergraduate level rarely change, and evaluations for all courses include the same 10 to 13 questions on topics such as:

- Quality of course discussions
- Quality of reading materials
- Usefulness of laboratory work or practicums (if applicable)
- Instructor knowledge and interest in course subject
- Instructor availability outside of course

- Instructor organization
- Instructor lecture skills
- Overall satisfaction with course
- Overall satisfaction with instructor

At **University B**, faculty can add questions specific to their course. For example, if a faculty member is testing new texts or technology they can include questions specifically about those materials. Additionally, they can adjust settings so their deans and department chairs do not receive responses to supplemental questions. This allows them solicit feedback from students on innovations in the classroom without the results appearing in tenure or promotion review processes. Several institutions also have additional evaluations for courses with labs and practicums.

At the graduate level, student course evaluations vary more by college within an institution. Deans of the college and faculty contribute to the development of these evaluations, and the questions are typically more subject-specific. College deans occasionally base questions on undergraduate student course evaluations.

Technology *All Institutions Use Software to Summarize Student Course Evaluation Data*

Online tools allow institutions to collect course evaluations from students without reducing the time spent learning in the classroom. Offices for academic administration at institutions with paperless evaluation systems require fewer resources (e.g., staff hours, office supplies, etc.) to enter and evaluate data. (See following page for a description of all software tools.)



Student Course Evaluation Software for Collection and Analysis

| Software | Institution | User | Purpose | Satisfaction |
|---|---------------------|--|---|---|
| Class Climate | University A | Dean's office, department chairs | Evaluation data analysis | Academic administrators report low satisfaction because staff struggle to create graphs, and deans and department chairs complain that they receive email for every scanned evaluation. |
| Qualtrix | University C | Office of academic administration, students | Collects student responses, some evaluation data analysis | Academic administrators at University C report satisfaction because they already owned the software so it required no additional investment, although Qualtrix has limited analysis capabilities. |
| Excel | University C | Office of academic administration | Evaluation data analysis | Academic administrators at University C report satisfaction, they use Excel in conjunction with Qualtrix and SPSS because Excel creates more insightful graphs than the other programs. |
| Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) | University C | Office of academic administration | Evaluation data analysis | Academic administrators at University C report satisfaction; they use SPSS in conjunction with Excel and Qualtrix because individually the software does not have adequate analytical capabilities. |
| Banner | University B | Office of academic administration, faculty, department chairs, deans, students | Collects student responses, evaluation data analysis | Staff in the office of academic administration report high satisfaction with Banner for collection and analytics. |



Administrators Support Transition to Paperless System, Faculty More Hesitant About Change

45,000

Saved Pieces of Paper

Contacts at **University C** estimate they saved 45,000 pieces of paper by eliminating paper surveys. Other saved resources include 100 staff hours.

Contacts identified two methods to transition to an online course evaluation system. The first is a top-down transition, during which academic administrators decide to transition and announce it to faculty and students. The alternative is a bottom-up transition, during which the faculty senates discusses and votes on whether to transition to an online process.

Administrator-Driven Transitions to Online Student Course Evaluations

Challenges

Faculty Unfamiliar with Technology



Provide trainings to faculty: At **University B**, academic administrators presented the online course evaluation system during an all-faculty meeting. The presentation included a training on the interface for faculty (e.g., how to customize the questions, how to download and manipulate the data, etc.). Additionally, a student demonstrated the interface students see as they complete the online course evaluation form so faculty could understand how the changes they make to the evaluation form impact student experience. After the initial formal presentation, most faculty training has been informal, with faculty training other faculty.

Faculty Resistant to Change



Present a unified position: After academic administrators decide to use an online course evaluation system, every academic leader and staff member must disseminate accurate information about the transition. To ensure buy-in from faculty and staff who oppose the new platform, academic leadership must articulate the benefits (i.e., fewer administrative resources, less class time dedicated to evaluations, etc.) for all members of the community (e.g., academic staff, faculty, students).

Faculty-Driven Transitions to Online Student Course Evaluations

Challenges

Faculty concerned with the impact on tenure review



Offer a low-risk trial period: Faculty at **University B** voted for a trial period, before determining whether to continue with online course evaluations. One condition of this trial period was that departments would not use the evaluations collected through the online process in tenure reviews, so that faculty could experiment with the system without the threat of repercussions on their career. At **University D**, a faculty working group studied the types of student who complete online course evaluations; its result allayed fears that only students with extreme viewpoints responded to online evaluations.

Misinformation increases faculty apprehension



Organize open forums: Provosts and associate provosts organize open forums for faculty to express concerns, and for academic administrators to demonstrate the value of online course evaluation systems. Contacts indicate faculty express concern about lower response rates and lower ratings, while academic administrators emphasize the decreased workload.

Online Student Response Rates are Lower than In-Class Response Rates

Contacts identify maintaining high student participation as the greatest challenge during the transition to online course evaluation systems. At **University C**, student participation rate decreased from 75 to 80 percent to 60 to 65 percent completion after the switch to an online system. All institutions that went through this transition report a significant decrease in the percentage of student who complete online course evaluations in comparison to the number who completed paper course evaluations. Methods to increase student participation occur both at the institutional level and through individual faculty initiatives. Contacts at **University D** expressed concern that certain types of incentives, such as raffles and academic credit, send a message to students that they should participate only for personal gain, and not community improvement.

Strategies to Increase Student Participation in Online Course Evaluations

Access to Final Grades

Faculty allow students who complete the course evaluation for their course to access the final grade prior to other students. Conversely, students who do not complete course evaluations may have to wait an additional time period (e.g., two weeks) to access their final grade. At **University B**, academic administrators will implement this policy at the institutional level starting in fall 2012.

Institution-wide Raffles

For institutions with campus-wide raffle initiatives, automated systems enter students who complete a course evaluation into a raffle. The first year after implementing an online system, the office for academic administration at **University D** spent \$2,000 on iPods for the raffle and experienced over 50 percent participation. In subsequent years, the amount spent on raffle prizes has decreased, and prizes include gift cards to campus bookstores and food vendors; however, the participation level also decreased. Contacts speculate that even if iPods were reinstituted as raffle prizes, participation would not improve, because the so many students already own iPods, they no longer serve as incentives.

Faculty-specific Raffles

Some faculty offer students course-specific raffles for enrolled students. At **University B**, students who complete online course evaluations print out the certificate they receive upon completion. They present it to the faculty who enters them in a raffle; potential prizes include extra credit on the final exam, \$5 gift cards, and items from the school bookstore.

Charitable Incentives

At **University E**, academic administrators identified an alumnus willing to donate a dollar to charity for every completed online course evaluation, during the first semester of the program they raised over \$50,000. Variations on this program include alumnus donations to the institution for every completed evaluation.

Academic Incentives

Individual faculty offer students extra credit in the course overall, or on the final exam, if they complete the online course evaluation. At **University B**, some faculty require students to print a screenshot of the evaluation completion certificate and bring it to class before they receive the final exam. If students do not have one, they must visit a computer lab and complete it before beginning the final exam.



IV. Management of Student Course Evaluations

Evaluation Storage *Course Evaluations Stored for at Least 10 Years in Digital and Paper Formats*

At all institutions, multiple offices and individuals store copies of student course evaluations. Online storage systems allow institutions to maintain completed course evaluations for a longer period of time without space limitations, and also facilitate access by faculty members and their supervisors.

Student Course Evaluation Storage

| Insitution | Dean's Office | Department Chair | Faculty Member | Academic Assessment | Format | Length of Time |
|--------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------|---|---|
| University A | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | Digital (Dean's office and Department chairs); Original Paper (faculty members) | Indefinitely |
| University B | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | All digital | Indefinitely |
| University C | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | All paper | 10 years (provosts determined length of time) |
| University D | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | All digital | Indefinitely |

Access to Evaluations *Faculty Subjects of Evaluations and Their Supervisors May Access Completed Student Course Evaluations for Annual and Tenure Reviews*

At **University A**, **University B**, and **University C**, academic administrators restrict access to completed course evaluations to the faculty member under evaluation, their department chair, and the college dean. Provosts and the office of institutional research may view the data on request but rarely do so. Academic administrators view the information as confidential. At **University B**, all faculty access the results through a password-protected Banner system; department chairs and deans may access the evaluations for faculty under their purview.

At **University C**, access to student course evaluations varies across departments. The office of academic administration stores paper copies in locked filing cabinets and academic administrators access scanned forms and data through password-protected computers.

Academic Administrators Publish Online For Students to Inform Course Selection and Create Culture of Transparency

At **University D**, students access information from student course evaluations through an online portal which informs students' course selection process and increases transparency in the faculty evaluation process. In 2008, administrators began to publish average ratings for all evaluations questions and student comments in response to students' concern that faculty and administrators did not consider students' evaluations when conducting faculty reviews. Academic administrators do not review the comments before they are posted online, but faculty can request the removal of comments they deem offensive (e.g., comments about faculty appearance or personal attacks). However, contacts note that since posting students' comments online, the tone of comments became more civil and students invest more in the evaluation process.

Publishing Student Course Evaluations Increases Student Engagement

"Students enroll in courses that are badly taught, and they fill out evaluations, and then the course is badly taught again. Sometimes professors rated as excellent do not receive tenure, and those with poor ratings do; there seems to be no impact from student evaluations. Since we cannot bring students into the tenure review committee we took a rather controversial step – a step students saw as universally positive and faculty less so – of publishing all comments and averages online from student course evaluations. Their comments directly impact other students, and that's a visible benefit."

- Council Interview

Evaluation Content Not Changed or Removed to Protect Student Identity

All institutions allow faculty to view students' anonymous comments, but do not remove any information that may identify students' identity. To preserve student privacy, institutions do not request students' name or date of birth, although they do collect students' major, grade point average range, class year, and anticipated grade in the course. Contacts at **University A**, which uses a paper system, note that faculty familiar with student's handwriting could identify them through comments. This is not a concern for institutions with online course evaluation forms.

No Course Evaluations for Small Courses

At **University C**, faculty do not administer student course evaluations in undergraduate classes with fewer than ten students and graduate courses with fewer than five students to protect student anonymity.

V. Application of Student Course Evaluations

Applications of Course Evaluations

Faculty Submit Summary Data from Student Course Evaluations to Tenure Review Committees

At all institutions, the tenure review committees use the results of student course evaluations in the review process, although the impact they have on the process depends on the department. At **University B**, faculty, deans, and provosts debated whether faculty members should submit course evaluations to tenure review committees, or the committee should access and read through evaluations online. Academic leaders decided the latter option relied too much on the proactive behavior of tenure committee members. Instead the faculty member under review prints summary data for each semester over the period under review and delivers paper copies to each member of the tenure review committee.

At **University A**, the faculty member under review creates a portfolio, which they submit to the tenure review committee as an argument for their eligibility for a tenured position. They include summary information from student course evaluations, and possibly quotations from responses to open-ended questions.

A faculty committee at **University D** reads all the student course evaluations comments for a specific department, and provides summaries to each faculty member on the tenure review committee.

Evaluations Inform Professional Development

Department chairs use student course evaluations to recommend professional development for faculty in areas such as:

- Classroom management
- Public speaking
- Lesson planning
- Syllabus development

Offices of Institutional Research Compare Data Across Departments

At all institutions, provosts and offices of institutional research have the option to view the result of student course evaluations; however, no provosts choose to view the data. At **University A**, the office of institutional research creates department summaries every five years. This summary includes a table that compares the average overall course rating for a department to the averages across the college and university. Administrators use this number to evaluate the comparative strength of department faculty.