

## Online Student Evaluation of Instruction

Campuses are beginning to move towards online student evaluation of instruction. That evaluation of online courses would commonly be carried out online seems obvious, but in a recent survey, 17% of campuses reported using the Internet to collect student evaluation data for face-to-face courses (Hoffman, 2003).

The primary impetus for moving student evaluations online is decreased cost. With regained class time factored in, one study found the cost of online evaluations to be about half of that of paper-based evaluations (Bothell and Henderson, 2003). Other campuses have also reported cost-savings. Many of the true costs of paper-based evaluations are distributed so that they are noticed more as nuisances than as dollar costs. Decreased costs may be seen more as a reduction in the nuisance of preparing and administering paper-based forms than as actual dollar savings. But the costs of the few minutes of class time lost to the administration of evaluations, faculty time to administer evaluations, and departmental assistant efforts to manage the process, all add up. Other advantages of online evaluations include increased convenience to students and a quicker turn-around time due to automated processing of results.

Moving student evaluations online may raise faculty concerns, especially as many faculty members are suspicious of student evaluations regardless of the means of administering them. Considerable research on student ratings of instruction suggests that well-constructed student rating forms are one reliable source of valid information for faculty improvement and personnel decisions (Cashin, 1988; Cashin 1990; Cashin, 1995). As is true for central processing of paper-based forms, online data must be handled with strict concern for confidentiality and appropriate dissemination of the results.

The biggest concern with online administration of student evaluations is student response rate. California State University, Fresno requires students to have access to a computer capable of interacting with the campus data network. The 2002 student technology survey (<http://www.csufresno.edu/ait/studenttechsurvey-report-f02.htm>) found that only 2% of students neither owned nor had access to a computer off campus. Our students are capable of completing online rating forms, but will they be motivated to do so? The overall response rate at the University of Maryland is 50% (<http://listserv.nd.edu/archives/pod.html>), while that at Brigham Young University is 70% (Johnson, 2003). The rate is higher if the university, and, especially, faculty members indicate to students that the results are important to them and explain how the data will be used. Providing a small amount of extra credit can bring the response rate to 90%. Reminder emails help. Some institutions provide incentives such as entering students in a drawing to receive a prize (Johnson, 2003). Another approach might be to deny students access to information available in Blackboard or Peoplesoft until they have submitted evaluation forms.

Faculty members may be concerned that online evaluations will result in lower ratings than paper-based evaluations, especially if the response rate is low. At Northwestern, results were mixed. In the study producing the strongest bias against online evaluations, online evaluations were 0.25 points lower (on a six-point scale) than were paper-based evaluations (Hardy, 2003). At BYU, when the same course sections were evaluated both online and on paper, response rates were 0.1 points higher for the online evaluations, and the online evaluations were less sensitive to response rate than were the paper-based evaluations (Johnson, 2003).

Perhaps due to relaxed time constraints and increased confidence about anonymity, students tend to produce more written comments, and those comments tend to be more thoughtful, when responding online than when responding on paper (Ballantyne, 2003; Johnson, 2003).

California State University, Fresno is expanding the use of the Internet in instruction and student services, and online administration of student ratings of instruction seems like a logical next step. While online evaluations do not yet predominate, sufficient examples are available to help us move forward successfully.

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