



Center for Teaching Excellence
Hampton University
Teaching Matters

April/May 2018

Volume 13, Number 2

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Online Course Evaluation: Low Response Rate and Strategies for Improvement

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In the last two decades, most US colleges and universities have moved their course evaluations from a paper-based, in-class activity to a web-based activity. Paper-based evaluations suffered from multiple issues including the fact that the evaluation process is expensive, time consuming and error-prone due to data entry errors, especially with regard to the students' comments. Furthermore, an absence of a student on the day of evaluation eliminated his/her chance to provide any input. The short window during class time also created issues with quality of response and on some occasions, faculty members were able to influence the evaluation process directly or indirectly. Hence, web-based evaluations potentially can address all of the paper-based evaluations' shortcomings described above. However, the online evaluation process has created its own problems.

It has been widely reported (and we have personal experience if we straddle both worlds) that online course evaluations have poor response rates. The absence of a classroom environment with a fixed time to complete the assessments leaves course evaluations to serve as an extra classroom activity for students. They must therefore find time on their own and need to be motivated enough to complete the evaluation. Additionally, course evaluations are often completed toward the end of the semester when students are short on time and these assessments seem like extra work or a burden to them.

Recent studies have shown a 20-30% drop in the response rate with an average of 23%. Some schools have reported that the online evaluation rate dropped from a paper-based evaluation rate within the 35%-85% range to a mere 5%-30% range in the first year of its application. Research on the opinion about online evaluation has been conducted, and all stakeholders have largely positive thoughts. However, some faculty members have expressed fear of lower ratings on online evaluations. This has been shown to be unfounded, as studies indicate that there is no statistical difference between the online and paper-based evaluation rate. Moreover, students have more positive views of online surveys, and they note that the biggest motivators in completing course evaluations are convenience, anonymity and accessibility. Writing comments online does not show their hand-writing which is a factor of why some students refrain from writing comments on paper. It also provides a longer timeframe for completion so students can provide more thoughtful comments.

It is puzzling that despite having positive opinions, the response rate remains relatively low compared to the previous paper-based response rate. Furthermore, the literature shows that colleges and universities are not willing to revert back to the paper-based evaluation system. Thus, it is important to find strategies to improve students' participation in the course evaluation using this new method.

The following is a brief summary of various strategies suggested and attempted by different schools, faculty members and researchers.

- **Faculty Member Reminders**

- The most effective reminder is by the individual faculty member himself/herself. It is suggested that faculty members remind students both in classroom as well as electronically to complete the evaluations.

- **Institutional Reminders**

- Multiple studies show that simple email reminders have a positive impact on the response rate. In fact, several universities send two email reminders.

- **Providing Explanations of How Evaluations are Used**

- Students often are not sure of the main objectives of course evaluations. Providing information on the utility of results of the course evaluations has shown to improve the response rate in some institutions.

- **Publication of Online Course Evaluations**

- Many institutions with online course evaluation systems publish the results of the course evaluations online. This allows students to see the university-wide statistical averages as well as some or part of the evaluation scores. This also gives students a sense that their time in completing the evaluation is important for the institution. Students will only evaluate courses if they believe that the quality of their experiences in courses matters to the institution.

- **Withholding Early Access to Grades**

- Certain institutions have created two separate dates for opening access to final grades based on the completion of the course evaluations. This is an incentive for students to complete course evaluation.

- **Random Sampling**

- The University of California-San Francisco does not require course evaluations by each student. Instead, they randomly assign students to complete assigned course evaluations only.

- **Providing In-Class Time for Evaluation**

- Some faculty members have tried to give certain times of a given day to evaluate courses during the class time. In some cases, this has shown to improve the response rate.

- **Posting on BlackBoard/Course Management Systems**

- A reminder announcement upon enrollment of the course prompting students to complete course evaluation can be sent either in-lieu of a personal email or in

conjunction with a personal email. A BlackBoard message can then act as a permanent reminder.

- **Assurance of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

- Students are to be assured that their responses are completely anonymous. For example, instead of sending emails to just students who have not responded, send a generic email to all students.

- **Micro-Incentives**

- Some have used micro-incentives to boost the response rate successfully. *However, this method is questioned by many researchers as being unethical and can bias the outcome. Hence most institutions, including Hampton University, do not approve of this approach.*

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Announcements

2018 Global Engagement and Spaces of Practice

Exploring Global Challenges across Disciplinary Boundaries

October 11, 2018 to October 13, 2018

The Westin Seattle

1900 5th Avenue

Seattle, WA 98101

This year's *Global Engagement and Spaces of Practice* conference will consider how educators are using place-based disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiry to focus and integrate learning across a variety of geographic, cultural, and philosophical domains to engage students in issues that matter to them and to society. Participants will share how they are connecting institutional leadership with curricular and cocurricular options to ensure that all students experience global learning, using place as a lens through which to understand the world. They will examine how these campus-wide approaches can become part of the institutional fabric, and how faculty and staff are prepared, supported, and rewarded to provide students with opportunities to apply their skills in a variety of settings, at increasingly challenging levels. For more information or to register, please visit the website at www.aacu.org.

2018 Transforming STEM Higher Education

November 8, 2018 to November 10, 2018

Hyatt Regency Atlanta

265 Peachtree St NE

Atlanta, GA 30303

Transforming STEM Higher Education invites academic STEM practitioners and scholars of all disciplines to join us as we critically examine the entire range of contemporary opportunities for—and challenges to—STEM higher education reform including, but not limited to, exploring evidence-based approaches to undergraduate STEM teaching, examining new approaches to broadening participation, interrogating emerging research studies related to STEM student learning, and verifying new assessment tools for determining undergraduate STEM teaching effectiveness. Conference attendees can expect to see disciplinary biases about evidence unveiled, fixations on approaches to “fixing the student” tested, and theories about what can and cannot count as evidence of effectiveness questioned. For more information or to register, please visit the website at www.aacu.org.