



Faculty Forum

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Rating My Professor: Online Student Course Evaluations

I am interested in student course evaluations because, as part of the Office of Institutional Research, I assisted with an online student course evaluation pilot program in spring 2007 and I continue to work with the system as it is rolled out campus wide. In addition, as a part-time WCU student, I fill out faculty evaluations at the end of each semester. My experience in both realms makes me a whole-hearted supporter of online evaluations for their efficiency, consistency, and anonymity.

I've had several different experiences with course evaluations as a student. In some classes all of the students seemed to fill out the forms in painstaking detail; in other classes most of the forms ended up in the trash as students stampeded for the door. I wondered if my handwriting or word choices were distinctive enough to be recognized and heard other students echo my thoughts. How anonymous were these surveys? How meticulously was our privacy guaranteed?

As a member of the IR staff, I view course evaluations from another perspective that considers their ease of use, their efficiency, and their value to faculty and administrators. Paper forms come out low on all of these considerations. Although it seems easy enough to pass out a form in class, this does not take into account time spent in collection, transcription, and analysis of the paper forms. There is an inevitable delay of several weeks before results can be compiled and provided to faculty and department heads. As far as value, we know that student evaluations are critical on the departmental level to both faculty and department heads for tenure considerations, promotion decisions, and determination of yearly salary increases. These evaluations can also provide information at the college and university levels; however, evaluations have been difficult to compare between departments due to wildly varying formats.

When WCU decided to revamp the student course evaluation system, the university formed a task force to target inefficiency and inconsistency. The Faculty Senate generated a list of standardized questions and produced twelve different evaluation forms for different types of courses. The different student assessment instruments (SAIs) cover standard lecture, independent research, activities, ITV-delivery, laboratories, seminars, online-delivery, studio performance, hybrid-delivery, internship/practica/clinical courses, independent research courses, and hybrid courses. These forms demonstrate uniform bases for evaluation but can also be adapted to meet the unique needs of different departments

and programs. Also, each SAI instrument offers open-ended questions as well as Likert-scale ratings to provide both qualitative and quantitative feedback.

The next question concerned the delivery evaluation forms. Online evaluation forms provided many advantages in cost and convenience in administering and collecting the data, but it was difficult to find the right delivery system. WebCT/WebCAT lacked sufficient security to protect student and instructor privacy; Banner lacked the option of providing open-ended questions; and Ultimate Survey could not provide a campus-wide administration of surveys. Eventually the members of the Task Force selected an outside vendor, CourseEval, and WCU launched a pilot program during the spring of 2007.

The pilot involved five departments: Psychology, Political Science, Applied Criminology, Marketing and Business Law, and Chemistry. During the initial weeks of the pilot, faculty expressed concern about students' motivation to log-in to an online system. However, students today are comfortable with the online format and perceive online forms as more convenient and private than the paper alternatives. The literature on online course evaluation backs these observations up, and some studies also show that students tend to provide longer and more detailed comments online than on paper forms.

Another faculty concern involves the perception of the superiority of response rate with paper forms. The common perception is that paper surveys have an almost perfect response rate. In comparison to that perception, the CATeval pilot's overall response rate of 45% seems low. However, when one realizes that paper forms actually tend towards a response rate of approximately 75%, the gap begins to narrow. As CATeval becomes a part of our campus culture for both faculty and students, the response rates will only increase.

Once the responses are gathered, what are the results like? As far as quality, studies show that, in addition to longer comments online, students tend to be more candid and detailed. In the privacy of their own environment, without the time constraints of the classroom setting, the open-ended comments get more attention. It's also interesting that students seem to give more positive feedback online, which countered fears expressed by faculty that only the disgruntled students would bother to go online to log their comments. It is possible that, by utilizing a format that is compatible with the current student culture, the results will be more measured and informative.

In addition, the results provided by the online course evaluations are more usable due to consistency in format, which enables department heads and administrators to compare information across disciplines and programs. The format also allows for almost instantaneous compilation and analysis of data, which in turn allows for efficient turn-around to faculty. In short, using online course evaluations offers huge advantages over paper forms in student usability, convenience, and effectiveness. As both a student and a staff member, I rate it as "Very Satisfactory" with a chili pepper thrown in for good measure.

Kirsten Huscusson, Social Research Assistant, Institutional Research and Planning

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to Kirsten Huscusson's "Rating My Professor: Online Student Course Evaluations,"
(11/1/07)

I was part of the pilot online student course evaluation project last semester. I anticipated that students would not go online to evaluate me, a logical assumption, I thought, given that most of the students did not even take the time to do the homework assignments. I was quite surprised when I discovered that the response rate was much higher than I expected, about 33% if my recollection is correct.

I also found that students were allowed to evaluate the course until after the exam day. By then, they all had received 85% of their grade and should have had an excellent idea as to whether they would pass or not. That particular semester, about one-third of the class received grades below a C-. One student wrote on the online evaluation form that, although according to the grades his classmates had received so far it looked like most of the students would fail, he predicted a miracle would occur and the currently-failing students would pass. Why? Because, as he said, the professor was on a tenure track and could not afford to fail so many students.

This raises several issues. First, why do students think that a "miracle" will occur? Grades are calculated mathematically--it's not an art. I do not curve grades. Sometimes, it is true, I grade easier than other times, but the final grade is always the sum of the student's semester-long grades.

Second, and more relevant to this discussion: should students be able to continue to evaluate faculty after the students have completed all of the coursework and can predict their grades? Will their perceptions of the professor be influenced by their expected grade? Will they lash out and "penalize" a professor by giving lower evaluations?

I worry about the "power" students believe they can exercise over a professor's career. Anonymous electronic evaluations may be more convenient for the administration, but they also may invite comments that would not be made "in person" or "on paper." They also invite students to band together outside of class and target a teacher they don't like or appreciate. It's not that outrageous to imagine a bunch of disgruntled students getting together to rant about a professor they don't like.

Most of us have felt the sting of a bad evaluation. We understand that it is a tool designed first for self-reflection and evaluation and second for faculty assessment (not course assessment, as it is called). But, we need to be careful of how the assessments are used and of the potential for abuse.

Jayne Zanglein, Business Law

Kirsten Huscusson has offered a clear and thorough explanation of the newly implemented CatEval system of student course evaluation. My response addresses the question of instructional improvement. The new CatEval is a one-size-fits-all procedure. (I know, future plans to enable instructor and departmental input are in the works, but they are not in place yet). One of the most constructive purposes of student course evaluation is the information provided to instructors for the improvement of teaching and course design. A one-size-fits-all instrument fails to accomplish this because the learning intentions (procedural and substantive) of any particular course must in major measure be unique and

therefore not measurable in a single instrument that applies commonly to all courses, even categorized by delivery type.

My point is to urge my colleagues not to view the CatEval as an expression of faculty development because it is not, or at least not much. Other procedures are needed to tailor data-gathering to particular aims that a course is “purposed” to achieve. There are countless ways to do this, and the Coulter Faculty Center is prepared to help with some of them. For example, the Small Group Assessment program helps gather purposeful information about teaching and course quality in face-to-face settings. The Online Course Assessment Tool offers similar help for online teaching. This is just the start of several ways that the CFC recognizes and assists WCU faculty examine their own unique pedagogy in a manner that prizes purpose-driven teaching and course design.

John LeBaron, Faculty Center