Piloting an Online Course Evaluation System

Due to the concerns with the paper system and OARCA's need to find alternatives to the current system, we piloted an online course evaluation system during the fall 2010 semester.

Through the Academic Standards, Practices, and Assessment Committee (APSAC), we asked for volunteers who were tenured faculty (didn't allow non-tenured faculty to participate until we had discussed the online system with chairs from the Rank and Tenure committees). Twenty-three faculty representing all four divisions volunteered to participate in the pilot. The form was developed using the exact same language and scoring as the five required questions from the faculty handbook. The faculty volunteers registered the courses they wanted included through an online portal. The total number of courses registered was 78. The courses were linked to the Registrar Office's student database, populating the system. Faculty were encouraged to send out emails with the link and make announcements at the end of classes asking the students to complete the course evaluations. The system automatically stopped accepting course evaluations at midnight on study day, the last day before the start of finals.

An email was sent out through the online system to all students providing them with directions and a link to complete their course evaluations. Three follow-up emails were sent to students who had not completed the evaluations over the evaluation period. Once they went to the course evaluation page using the link provided, they were asked to login using their CSB/SJU logon and password. Once logged in, they could view the courses with course evaluations available. Once they submitted a completed course evaluation, the course was removed from the list.

Course evaluation results were made available to faculty following the deadline for final grades to be submitted. They had three options for viewing the course evaluations and results: first, faculty could export data (download course evaluation returns to an Excel, SPSS, Access, or text file), second, faculty could view summary (frequency tables with links to all comments by question), or third, faculty could view all data (view of each course evaluation with the option to print each individual course evaluation). These different ways to view the data allowed for maintaining a paper file will all course evaluations including frequency tables and to export the results into formats that are easier to work with if a faculty chooses to analyze results further than frequency.

The online course evaluations were limited to the five required questions with the ability to add questions that would be consistent across all of an individual faculty's registered courses. In next use of the system, faculty will be able to add different questions for each course registered.

Because this was not systemwide, we were not able to automatically generate email reminders but manually sent the student reminders through the system. If the system is used campus-wide, this will be ready. Emails to students from faculty can also be generated and sent through Forms Manager.

Pilot results

Of the 78 courses registered from 23 faculty, there were 1,181 invitations to complete course evaluations sent through the online system. The 1,181 invitations are 6% of the total course evaluations for the fall semester. At the end of the survey period, 1,019 had been completed or 86.3% of possible evaluations.

OARCA sent out 18,395 paper course evaluations to faculty with 11,278 returned or 61.3%. This does not include labs or the Nursing department (complete course evaluations internally).

The course evaluation packets *returned* to OARCA had a potential return of 12,816 with an actual return of 11,278 or 88%. This is comparable to the online rate of 86.3%. The in class participation rate of course evaluations returned to OARCA is only 1.7% higher than the online course evaluations. This suggests that there is no advantage to completing course evaluations in class over an online format.

Survey Results

OARCA surveyed students that had completed course evaluations online and faculty that participated in the pilot. The main interest was to get an idea of the ease of use for the system, how it worked in practice, and general feedback including concerns or dislikes of the system.

Abraham Lauer, a student worker funded through the Teagle grant (Ken Jones, Project Director), compiled and sorted the short answer responses based on common themes that he found. The question-by-question results are as follows. The number of written responses is not equal to the total number of responses, as some students addressed several points in a single comment. These comments were counted in multiple themes.

Student Surveys

We received 320 student responses of a possible 1,019 to the survey. This represents 31.4% of the students invited to take the survey.

Question 1: How many times did faculty remind you in class to complete your course evaluation?

	# of Responses	Rate
None	40	12.5%
1-2 Times	194	60.6%
3-4 Times	65	20.3%
4-5 Times	14	4.4%
6 or more	5	1.6%
2 did not answer		0.6%

Question 2: How often did faculty remind you via email to complete you course evaluations?

None	110	34.4%
1/week	159	49.7%
2/week	42	13.1%

3 or more   9   2.8%

Question 3: Were the system generated reminder emails effective?

Yes	263	82.2%
No	21	6.6%
Undecided	34	10.6%
2 did not answer		0.6%

Question 4: Were the online directions you received for completing the course evaluations clear?

Yes	311	97.2%
No	6	1.9%
Undecided	3	0.9%

Question 5: Did faculty explain the importance of completing course evaluations?

Yes	231	72.2%
No	63	19.7%
Undecided	26	8.1%

Question 6: Were you more likely to provide written comments to faculty in an online format than an in-class format?

Yes	137	42.8%
No	108	33.8%
Undecided	75	23.4%

Written explanations of responses (in common themes):

- 59 students felt they would have given the same responses both online and in classroom. Students did not think the format of the evaluation would affect their answers.

  "I'll write what I want to say, regardless of the means in which I'm filling out the eval."

- 50 students had more time to think about the question online, did not feel rushed, and could give thorough answers. The students liked being able to take time to think about comments instead of rushing to finish the evaluation as they would have in class time.

Students also thought online evaluations were a better use of time than taking class time to fill them out.

"Online we have as much time as we need. Although my teachers in class also provided ample time, I was more inclined to use the extra time to get to the bus than to write effective comments that I had thoroughly thought about as I was when I had unlimited time online."

"It is easier to sit down and be able to think about what to comment on and not be rushed in class."

- 30 students found it easier to type lengthy comments than to write them. Whether due to speed or laziness, students were more likely to type complete comments than to write them.

"It is faster to type than to write by hand, so I can write more in an unlimited space."

"Typing is faster and easier"

- 24 students felt they had more anonymity and privacy online. Students felt that online was more anonymous because typing cannot be identified as handwriting can.

"Feels more anonymous online"

"They can't see the handwriting"

- 18 students felt that being given time in class was more motivating than trying to find time themselves. Some students did not like having to use their personal time and would rather have completed the forms in class. Students also felt more motivated in class as they are already there and thinking about the class.

"It is more motivating to do the evaluation during class because everyone else is doing it at that time so I take more time to write comments than when I am doing it on the computer outside of class and could be doing something else."

"In-Class I would of actually done it. For online format it was just an email so I could of just blown it off. In-Class we were forced to do."

- 15 students felt that online evals were more convenient and easier. The students enjoyed being able to choose at their own convenience when to complete the evaluation forms. They also felt that the online evaluations were simply easier than the paper copies.

"It's easier to do online and I can do it at my convenience. "

"You feel more private about your comments when taking them online, perhaps in the comfort of your own room."

Question 7: Were you more likely to give meaningful comments with an online format than an in-class format?

Yes	129	40.3%
No	104	32.5%
Undecided	84	26.3%
3 did not answer		0.9%

Written explanations of responses (in common themes):

- 56 students had more time to think about the question online, did not feel rushed, and could give meaningful answers. The students liked being able to take time to think about comments instead of rushing to finish the evaluation, as they would have during class time. Students also thought online evaluations were a better use of time than taking class time to complete them.

  "I believe that the online format gave me more time to give comments without distractions from other students."

  "Time and space were more available and I was able to sit down and think about it before responding"

- 49 students felt they would have given the same responses both online and in classroom. Students did not prefer either way to the other.

  "It's all the same to me."

  "I would have written the same information and comments whether it was done in class or online."

- 19 students felt they have more anonymity and privacy online. Students felt that online was more anonymous because typing cannot be identified as handwriting can.

  "It seems like it is even more anonymous online, which is good."

  "No handwriting seen.... I have a very distinctive style of writing, so it was easier for me to feel comfortable giving feedback when all the writing is in a font that looks the same."

- 14 students found it easier to type lengthy comments than to write them. Students were more likely to type complete comments than to write them.

"Because it is easier to type a lot of comments than hand write them out."

"I type better than I write."

- 7 students felt that being given time in class was more motivating than trying to find time themselves. Some students did not like having to use their personal time and would rather have completed the forms in class. Students also felt more motivated in class as they are already there and thinking about the class. Students also voiced concerns about having one more thing to worry about during finals week.

  "I was more likely to give meaningful comments in class because I had time in class and nothing else to distract me from giving comments."

  "Personally, I provided less when asked to do it on my own time, especially during finals, rather than being given class time to do it."

Question 8: Do you feel that your anonymity was protected?

Yes	243	75.9%
No	26	8.1%
Undecided	50	15.7%
1 did not answer		0.3%

Written explanations of responses (in common themes):

- 29 students felt that not having their handwriting on a form was more anonymous than the in-class evaluations. Students worried about the professor recognizing their handwriting on in-class evaluations. Typing online provided more security and anonymity.

  "There is no chance of recognizing handwriting in an online submission!"

  "I am under the impression that the teacher reads these evaluations so if we hand write them the teacher would be able to easier decipher which evaluation is mine."

- 21 students were not sure or did not express any concern about their anonymity. Students did not know how the results would be relayed back to the professor, so they were not sure whether it was private or not. Others did not seem to care whether their comments were anonymous.

  "I guess I don't know for sure. Good point, survey."

  "Were they supposed to be anonymous? I guess I didn't really care."

- 16 students felt that they could trust the school's claim of anonymity regardless of how the evaluation was completed. Students were confident that the school would maintain their privacy.

  "CSB/SJU is not a conspiracy against my privacy"

  "I was told that there would be complete anonymity and I believe that."

- 15 students felt that their online answers were more secure than the in-class paper forms. Without giving a reason, these students stated that the online system felt more private.

  "I felt more protected with the online evaluation."

  "The online format seems more anonymous than paper format."

- 10 students felt that the online system was less secure because of possible hacking or 'e-trails' connected with their e-mail accounts. Students worried about whether the Internet was secure and thought their responses could be electronically traced back to them.

  "I don't trust the internet. I'm sure that my name or other information was tracked to my evaluation. "

  "I know that it is being sent from my e-mail which makes me a little uncomfortable."

Question 9: Do you prefer online course evaluations to paper, in-class course evaluations?

Yes	195	60.9%
No	50	15.6%
Undecided	74	23.2%
1 did not answer		0.3%

Written explanations of responses (in common themes):

- 48 students felt the online evaluations were easier, convenient, more efficient, and did not waste class time.

  The students thought the online evaluation was a better system.

  "Easier to do and doesn't waste class time "

  "Online course evaluations don't use class time, no one needs to be responsible for bringing evaluations to the registrar...it's an overall more efficient way of doing it."

- 31 students valued the sustainability of the on-line system and did not feel wasteful of paper. The students thought the in-class system wasted paper and were happy to help save by switching to an online system.

  "I prefer electronic because I feel like paper evaluations are a waste of paper when it can so easily be provided online."

  "Save paper!"

- 23 students did not have a preference either way.

  "Makes no difference to me."

  "Doesn't matter to me!"

- 22 students could take more time on the on-line evaluations and did not feel rushed. The students liked being able to take time to think about comments instead of rushing to finish the evaluation as they would have in class time. Students also thought online evaluations were a better use of time than taking class time to complete them.

  "I liked doing it on my own time, it was simple, I hate scantrons and pencils, and I can fully think through my answers. "

  "They are faster, easier, and you are able to take more time to write out and think about your answers."

- 13 students would rather do it in class because the time is set aside specifically for the evaluation, and they do not need to take time to do it out of class. The students were already overwhelmed during finals week and did not want another thing added to their plate. They worried about accidentally trashing the reminder emails and having to find their own time to fill out the evaluation.

  "It is one more thing to have to worry about outside of class."

  "The last thing I need is another email/online chore to worry about."

Question 10: Would you like to see all course evaluations be available online?

Yes	194	60.6%
No	40	12.5%
Undecided	84	26.3%
2 did not answer		0.6%

Written explanations of responses (in common themes):

- 50 students felt the online evaluations were easier, convenient, more efficient, and did not waste class time. The students thought the online evaluation was a better system.

  "Easier and can do it on your time"

  "It would be much easier and they'd be all in one place and no one would have to proctor or deliver the envelope and we wouldn't have to use class time"

- 26 students valued the sustainability of the on-line system and did not feel wasteful of paper. The students thought the in-class system wasted paper and were happy to help save by switching to an online system.

  "Doesn't matter. GO GREEN is the outcome of online."

  "I think that it would be nice to complete the course evaluations online because it is convenient and is environmentally friendly because no paper is needed to complete the evaluations."

- 18 students did not have a preference either way.

  "Either way works for me."

  "Doesn't really matter to me."

- 5 students did not feel as motivated to complete the on-line evaluations as they did the in-class evaluations and worried about finding time to complete them during finals week. They thought that it was better to have time set aside in class specifically for evaluations than to find the time themselves. They also expressed concern about having too many things to do during finals week.

  "While it is allows for more time and fewer distractions, it also requires that students make time outside of class. While I think students who really want to give feedback (constructive or angry) will make the time, there will probably be lots of students who will not remember to make time or have the time, or just won't care. But if the students don't care in the first place...should we even be caring about their feedback?"

  "Maybe two weeks before the last day of finals. That way students can deal with them before finals week."

Question 11: Do you have any other thoughts or recommendations for an online system of course evaluations?

- 19 students favored online evaluations for various reasons: efficiency, convenience, sustainability, etc.

- 6 students expressed concern that others would not take the time to complete the evaluations or would trash the reminder emails.
- Other comments:

"They were given too early as I now have some comments regarding the last few assignments. Also, although I do not know if this would be possible, it would be nice to be able to edit the evaluation after it is submitted because no matter how much I think about what I'm going to write before I fill it out, I always come up with more feedback after I press submit and would like to be able to include that as well."

"I disliked having to go back to the beginning of the process to submit my second eval: maybe it could have a button that just brings you to the next form?"

"Maybe better more relevant questions."

"Maybe have it emailed from the school instead of the teacher. It would make it seem more anonymous."

"If online course evaluations are going to be the main evaluations, they need to be done during class. Otherwise, students are going to do them quickly online and not give meaningful and complete answers."

"Maybe a question about textbooks would be helpful for the profs. Also, profs may like to add their own questions which may be more specific to the eval - such a function would be useful."

Faculty Survey

We received 14 faculty responses of a possible 23. This represents 61% if faculty invited to take the survey.

Question 1: Were the directions on how to register classes clear?

	# of Responses	Rate
Yes	92.9%	13
Undecided	7.1%	1

Question 2: What other information would have been helpful? (regarding question 1)

2 faculty members said that no other information needed.

1 professor expressed concern that the directions were still confusing: *"They were pretty clear, but I messed them up anyway. It could be easier to register your intent, but to not make the questions available to students immediately, to give us more time to prepare our questions."*

11 made no comment.

Question 3: If you encountered any problems with the system, were your questions answered quickly with effective guidance?

Yes	85.7%	12
No	7.1%	1
Undecided	7.1%	1

Question 4: Is the data analysis easy to view, use, and read?

Yes	57.1%	8
No	21.4%	3
Undecided	21.4%	3

Question 5: How often did you remind students to complete course evaluations during class?

1 professor reminded students 1-2 times.

6 faculty members reminded their students 2 times.

3 faculty members reminded their students 2-3 times.

3 faculty members reminded their students 3-4 times.

1 made no comment

Question 6: How often did you send out reminders via email?

2 faculty members never sent out reminder emails.

9 faculty members sent out 1-2 reminder emails.

1 professor sent out 2-3 reminder emails.

1 professor sent out "half a dozen" reminder emails.

1 made no comment

Question 7: What did you like best about the online system?

9 faculty members appreciated not having to take class time to fill out the evaluations.

4 faculty members thought it was easier to read the responses to the open ended questions in electronic form.

2 faculty members thought the students gave responses that are more honest because they were not pressed for time.

2 faculty members appreciated the sustainability of the paperless evaluations.

1 professor saw no difference.

1 made no comment

Question 8: What did you dislike about the online system?

4 faculty members wished they could have added different questions for different courses.

2 faculty members were concerned that participation in an online evaluation would be much lower than in-class evaluations.

2 faculty members had trouble reading the data. The comments were not lined up with the ratings that students gave the questions.

2 faculty members found nothing they disliked about the online system.

1 professor was concerned about student privacy.

1 professor found the setup to be confusing.

1 professor thought the online system was good, but preferred the in-class evaluation.

1 made no comment

Question 9: What suggestions do you have for future administrations of the online course evaluation system?

3 faculty members wanted to be able to add different questions for different courses.

2 faculty members, concerned about the participation level, suggested that students be unable to see their grades until after the course evaluation is completed.

2 faculty members encouraged a change to a campus-wide online evaluation system.

1 professor wanted clarification as to who owns the data.

1 professor wanted to see the comments connected with the rating a student was given.

5 made no comment

Question 10: Did you receive feedback on the system from students?

Yes	35.7%	5
No	64.3%	9

Question 11: Please describe the feedback given by students about the system.

All 5 responses from faculty said that all student feedback was positive for a variety of reasons:

- Spent more time on the evaluation.
- Typing is easier than writing.
- They could choose when to complete the evaluation.

9 made no comment

Question 12: If the online course evaluation system continues, would you recommend it to colleagues?

Yes	76.9%	10
No	7.7%	1
Undecided	15.4%	2

1 did not answer

Question 13: Why would you recommend, not recommend, or are undecided about the online course evaluation system?

7 faculty members thought the online evaluation was easier and more efficient than in-class evaluations.

4 faculty members were glad to not take class time to complete the evaluations.

2 faculty members appreciated the sustainability of a no-paper evaluation.

1 professor thought anonymity was better protected with the online system.

1 professor thought the online system was good, but preferred the in-class evaluation.

1 professor thought clarification was needed about the procedures for 3rd year review and tenure files.

3 made no comment

The survey results from participants in the online pilot were overall very positive and provided some great feedback for the future system. It is worth reiterating that student anonymity and security of course evaluation results are protected in the current system. This was the first priority of OARCA and IT when the online system was developed. The CSB|SJU IT department is the only department that has the ability to view any results outside of the faculty. This is only for the purpose of being able to provide assistance to faculty. OARCA does not have the necessary permissions to view faculty results or students that have completed their course evaluations. Faculty cannot see names of students that have completed course evaluations and cannot view data results or individual responses until after the deadline for posting grades. Any permission outside of IT to view results are given by and the responsibility of individual faculty.

Based on the pilot results and surveys, there are several changes and upgrades that have been made or are in process with the online course evaluation system.

The first change will allow faculty to add questions to individual surveys. Faculty in the pilot could add questions but they were added to all of their course evaluations. Now, faculty will be able to add questions specific to each course.

A web-based historical repository for each faculty will have all course evaluations for each semester used available to faculty. This will provide a longitudinal view of all data for a specific course over time or all evaluations over many semesters.

Faculty will have an option to allow the Rank and Tenure Committee access to view course evaluations online rather than creating a paper file that includes all of their course evaluations. This is a secure way to share course evaluation results without the risk of losing or damaging the paper files. The online system does allow for printing individual course evaluations if faculty wants to have a paper file.