Online Student Ratings at Syracuse University

Syracuse University's online student rating system was developed in 2010 by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA). In fall 2014, approximately 85 percent of student course evaluations distributed by OIRA were administered using the online system.

As is the case with the pen and paper student ratings, departments or colleges own their evaluation forms. The same forms currently being used in the department can be used in the online student rating system.

Advantages

Moving to online student ratings offers a variety of benefits to departments, faculty, and students. Among these are:

- *Increased quality of responses* – Students have as much time as they need to consider and respond to the items. All students enrolled in the course can respond.
- *Greater data integrity* – The risk of the data collection process being compromised is virtually eliminated. Students have a passcode and can only submit once for each form.
- *Confidentiality of responses* – Students no longer have reason to be concerned that their handwriting will be recognized.
- *Greater efficiency* – Forms will no longer need to be organized, distributed, collected, and prepped for processing. Qualitative and quantitative results are available at the same time.
- *Saved class time* – Time does not need to be allotted in class for students to complete the assessment forms, although faculty can still choose to do so.

Administration

A major advantage of the online system is that is greatly reduces the workload for staff who administer the student ratings process.

When a department moves online, the process is managed by a department coordinator who is trained by OIRA staff. Courses and student information are loaded into the system automatically from Student Records. The department coordinator then selects the courses to be evaluated and which evaluation form(s) will be used for each course. (A department may have more than one evaluation form, such as an instructor form and a TA form.)

The system opens to students on the Monday of the last full week of classes. The department coordinator sends an initial email to all students taking courses in that includes information about accessing the system and then sends reminders throughout the evaluation period. The coordinator can track response rates for faculty and inform them of their response rates while the system is open.

Responses

Over the five years that the online system has been in use, OIRA has carefully tracked response rates and results in order to determine whether the mode of delivery has any effects on student responses. Our findings have been:

- Response rates are somewhat lower with the online system than on paper. There is substantial variation in response rates across departments but the overall difference has been between 10 and 15 percentage points.
- However, there are no systematic differences in the demographic/grade profiles of paper completers and online completers.
- We have not found any systematic differences in the mean ratings between courses that use paper forms and online forms. Published studies in refereed journals have also generally concluded that there are no statistically significant differences in mean ratings between the two modes of delivery.
- OIRA did not analyze open-ended responses on paper forms, so we cannot empirically compare the frequency or length of open-ended responses between paper and online formats. Anecdotally, faculty report that students write longer and more thoughtful responses when using the online system.

Faculty's Role

Research on student ratings has consistently shown that instructors have a significant effect on both the rate and quality of responses. Some of the ways that faculty can have a positive effect on student response rates and quality of feedback are:

- Inform students when the course rating site is open and remind their students to complete the forms during the evaluation period.
- Discuss the online evaluation process in their classes.
- Explain to students why it is important for faculty to receive student feedback.
- Explain how they use student feedback to improve their teaching.
- Provide students the opportunity to complete their evaluations in class, either on their own electronic devices or in a computer lab.

OIRA has developed a "best practices" guide for enhancing student response rates which provides a number of specific strategies for faculty and departments. Contact Seth Ovadia (saovadia@syr.edu) for a copy of the guide.

Results

Results of student course ratings that are collected using the online system are made available to department administrators within 15 working days after final grades are due for the semester. With rare exceptions, departments that are fully online receive their results earlier than departments that use paper evaluations.