

UK Institutional Research Brief: Results of the Pilot Study of an Online Teacher/Course Evaluation Process

Summer 2008

The technological infrastructure supporting the University of Kentucky's current Teacher/Course Evaluation (TCE) process was dismantled in spring 2007 when the mainframe computer and printer were taken off-line. Without the ability to pre-slug information on course evaluation forms, the University is now faced with a choice about the future of the TCE process. UK could spend additional funds on outsourcing the pre-slugging of forms or move to an online course evaluation process.

Provost Subbaswamy appointed a committee to study course evaluations in July 2006 in anticipation of changes to the existing process. The group was charged with studying options for continuing the current TCE process with additional support from vendors and examining the relative merits of moving to a web-based process. In studying the possible transition to an online evaluation process, the committee was instructed to consider:

- Special problems with web-based surveys, such as lower response rates;
- Strategies to boost response rates; and
- Other factors that may lead to faculty's lack of confidence in the validity of the results.

After reviewing the literature on online resources, the committee found that a number of institutions, including most of UK's benchmarks, have started to use web-based evaluations for at least a portion of their courses. Given the potential benefits of web-based evaluations, the Committee recommended undertaking a pilot study of an online rating system with a limited number of courses or departments.

Research on Online Course Evaluations

It is unclear how many colleges and universities currently use online methods of evaluating courses and professors. Brigham Young University maintains a website that catalogues institutions' involvement in online evaluation systems and provides resources for institutions considering the transition to web-based ratings. Institutions that access the website are encouraged to post their level of involvement in online evaluation systems, but BYU does not assume responsibility for the accuracy of the information posted by institutions. According to the OnSET website, "As of May 2008, the website "lists 26 campus-wide systems, 44 with at least one entire academic department, 30 online and distance course systems and 20 with less than one department using online rating

systems.” It is likely that a far greater number of institutions use an online TCE process than the colleges and universities that have posted information on the OnSET website. Nevertheless, the great majority of institutions listed on the website report limited involvement in online evaluations. While 16 of UK’s benchmark institutions evaluate some of their courses online, only the University of Virginia reports campus-wide involvement in its online ratings system.

Johnson (2006) has reviewed the research findings on online rating systems at his institution and at other colleges and universities.¹ Some of the benefits of web-based evaluations include:

- Quicker feedback to instructors
- Savings in class time
- Customization of rating forms and reports
- Cost savings *after* initial start-up
- More detailed and more instructive comments from students

Dr. Johnson also noted some of challenges associated with online systems, including: gaining the support of faculty and students; assuring students about the confidentiality of their evaluations; defraying the initial start-up expenditures and perhaps the greatest challenge—ensuring acceptable response rates. Research at BYU and at Northwestern University has revealed that online ratings do not differ significantly from evaluations obtained from the more commonly used paper forms (Hardy, 2003). Studies at BYU revealed high positive correlations between paper and online results ($r = +.87; +.89$).

Many universities experience an initial drop in response rates after they adopt an online TCE process. An early survey of the nation’s 200 “most wired” colleges found that 98% of these institutions used mostly paper evaluation forms to conduct their TCEs (Hmielski and Champagne, 2000). Two-thirds of these colleges reported paper-based response rates of 70 percent or higher. But response rates for online evaluations varied greatly, from 20 percent to 90 percent. Layne, DeCristoforo and McGinty (1999) found that traditional paper-and-pencil evaluations commanded response rates of 61 percent compared to 48 percent for online evaluations. Similarly, Cummings, Ballantyne and Fowler (2002) documented that response rates for paper evaluation forms were significantly higher than those achieved through an online system (65% vs. 30%). In their comparison of paper-based and online course evaluations, Norris and Conn (2005) found average response rates of 83% and 34%, respectively. However, when several strategies for boosting student participation (e.g., announcing the availability of the evaluation link and sending email reminders to complete evaluations) were used, online response rates were 67%. Some research has shown that variation in online response rates is not necessarily

¹ The Committee initiated its study of available TCE options by attending a Web Conference on “Implementing an Online Student Rating Program” on July 13, 2006 led by Dr. Trav Johnson, Asst. Director of the Faculty Center at Brigham Young University. Examination of the BYU website maintained by Dr. Johnson and his colleagues reveals that 16 of UK’s benchmark institutions use online evaluations for at least some of their courses. Only Michigan State University and the Universities of Illinois and Georgia are not listed on the OnSET website.

homogeneous across different types of classes. The fluctuation in response rates in one study suggests that student participation is not simply a function of class size or discipline; however upper division classes tended to have higher response rates than lower division classes (Anderson et al., 2006).

Johnson (2006) noted that the primary problem with low participation is the possibility of non-response bias. This threat to the validity of the process occurs when students who participate in the course evaluations offer different ratings than those who do not complete the evaluations. In one study conducted by Dr. Johnson and his associates, the correlations between online response rates and overall course evaluations were not statistically significant. He reports that “For online ratings, point estimates suggest that it would take a reduction in the response rate of about 40 percentage points to lower the overall course or instructor ratings by 0.1” Based upon his review of the literature, Dr. Johnson contends that online ratings are less prone to non-response bias than paper ratings, although he notes that low responses rates can potentially have an adverse effect upon reliability and validity.

Contrary to Johnson’s (2006) assessment, some evidence for non-response bias was found by institutional researchers at Drexel University upon examining the demographic characteristics of respondents and non-respondents to web-based course evaluations (McGourty, Scoles and Thorpe (2002); Thorpe (2002). This study found that women were more likely to respond to an online course system than men, and students with higher course grades were more apt to respond to the web-based evaluations than students who were not performing well academically. Moreover, upper division students showed a greater tendency to complete course evaluations than lower division students. This study did not, however, attempt to gauge the effect that the under-representation of certain segments of the student population had upon the overall course evaluations.

The UK Colleges of Pharmacy and Dentistry recently started to use their own online TCE systems. Anderson, Cain, and Bird (2005) found that over 85 percent of pharmacy students filled out online evaluations in three selected classes. Students gave high marks to the online system on a follow-up questionnaire. Nine of 10 students (91%) agreed or strongly agreed that the online process was preferable to the traditional paper-based rating system. Nearly four of five respondents (78%) were in agreement that they would rather do online evaluations than “take up class time” completing forms. Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the online system: was more convenient (91%); allowed me to make more comments (79%); and provided more constructive responses from students (75%). “Protection of anonymity” was the only dimension on which paper-based surveys achieved slightly higher ratings (94% vs. 84%) than online evaluations. Concern about the confidentiality of ratings is consistent with the results of another evaluation of online course evaluations (Layne et al., 1999).

The positive experiences of the Colleges of Pharmacy and Dentistry with online course evaluations are encouraging. However, the ability to generalize from the experiences of students in these colleges to the undergraduate population is questionable. In all likelihood, first-professional students in these colleges are more engaged in their studies

and more serious about their responsibility to provide professors with meaningful feedback than the typical UK undergraduate. These differences probably account for the high response rates (85% - 100%) in these colleges compared to the overall campus.

The problem of reduced response rates from a web-based process is a common experience for institutions that choose this path. However, inadequate student participation threatens to undermine the credibility of the process in the eyes of faculty. To respond to these challenges, the UK Office of Institutional Research designed a quasi-experimental evaluation that compared the ratings and response rates achieved by the traditional paper-based forms to those obtained using the online approach. The results of these analyses should inform decisions about whether to adopt the web-based evaluations on a wider basis.

Method

In response to the Provost's request for volunteers to assist in the pilot study, deans from the Colleges of Agriculture, Arts and Sciences, Communications and Information Studies, and Engineering agreed to have selected courses evaluated online toward the end of the Spring 2008 semester. Participation was limited to tenured faculty so that professors on tenure track would not be adversely affected by possible changes in their ratings from the online system. The most basic experimental design to study the effects of evaluation mode upon students' ratings would identify faculty who taught two sections of the same course. One section would be randomly assigned to the traditional paper-based approach to evaluation, and the other would be assigned to the online method. Unfortunately, there were only 12 faculty members from the four participating colleges who taught two sections of the same course in Spring 2008. Therefore, this simple experimental design was not an option for the pilot study.

Quasi-Experimental Design

We employed a quasi-experimental design to respond to various situational constraints. Only tenured professors who had taught the same course in Spring 2007 and in Spring 2008 were recruited. The use of prior course evaluations provided important baseline information. The online treatment group was comprised of 83 different classes taught by 67 professors from the four participating colleges. The control group, drawn as a random sample of all courses offered by participating colleges in Spring 2007 and 2008, consisted of 83 different classes taught by 78 professors. The quasi-experimental design used in this pilot study is presented in Table 1.

Two weeks prior to the end of the Spring 2008 semester, 4,196 students enrolled in the treatment group classes were emailed invitations to participate in the online evaluations. OIR staff asked participating faculty members to remind their students at least once to complete the online evaluations. In addition, students received up to two emails

TABLE 1. Quasi-Experimental Groups by Timing and Mode of the Evaluation

Groups	Observation I Spring 2007	Observation II Spring 2008
Online Treatment Group	Paper Form	Online Form
Control Group	Paper Form	Paper Form

reminding them to complete the ratings during the two-week evaluation window. The content of the web-based form was identical to the standard paper form used to evaluate courses and instructors, except for five additional items that assessed students' perceptions of the online evaluation process and their satisfaction with it.

Table 2 shows the number of students enrolled in courses taught by the treatment and control groups in Spring 2007 and 2008.² A total of 15,092 students were enrolled in courses taught by the faculty over the past two spring semesters. Students enrolled in courses taught by the treatment group comprised 61% of the enrollments in Spring 2007 and 57% of the enrollments in Spring 2008.

TABLE 2. Student Enrollments in the Treatment and Control Groups

	Group		Total
	Control	Treatment	
Spring 2007	3,050	4,703	7,753
Spring 2008	3,143	4,196	7,339
Total	6,193	8,899	15,092

Table 3 shows the courses in the treatment and control groups by course level. Since only tenured faculty members were selected for participation in this study, it is not surprising that lower division courses were under-represented in the pilot study, compared to the usual distribution of course offerings at the University. However, chi-square tests revealed that the online treatment and control groups did not differ in terms of course levels taught ($p=.11$).

² The same student might appear in more than one cell of Table 2.

TABLE 3. Course Level of Sections in the Study

Courses by Level	Group		Total
	Control	Treatment	
Lower (100 – 299 level)	10	19	29
Upper (300 – 499 level)	43	32	75
Graduate (500+ level)	30	32	62
Total	83	83	166

Results

The objective of this pilot study was to provide preliminary information on whether the mode of evaluation—paper or web-based forms—has an effect upon students’ response rates and their satisfaction ratings with the instructor and course.

Response Rates

The impact of online evaluations upon response rates was analyzed employing course-level participation rates as the unit of analysis. Figure 1 shows the mean course response rates for the control and online treatment groups. The average response rate for courses in the control group in spring 2008 was 80.7%, virtually identical to Spring 2007’s rate of 80.0%. The average response rate for courses in the online treatment group in spring 2008 was 66.6%, a decrease from this group’s spring 2007 (71.0%) ratings (two sample paired t-test, p-value=.051). Typically, one of the preferred ways to analyze results of a study with baseline and post treatment measures is analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), assuming that certain underlying assumptions are met. In this context, ANCOVA looks at the effect of using paper versus online evaluations on course response rates, after accounting for group differences at baseline. ANCOVA first uses regression analysis to predict the 2008 response rate based on the baseline response rate and then uses Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the residuals to determine whether significant differences

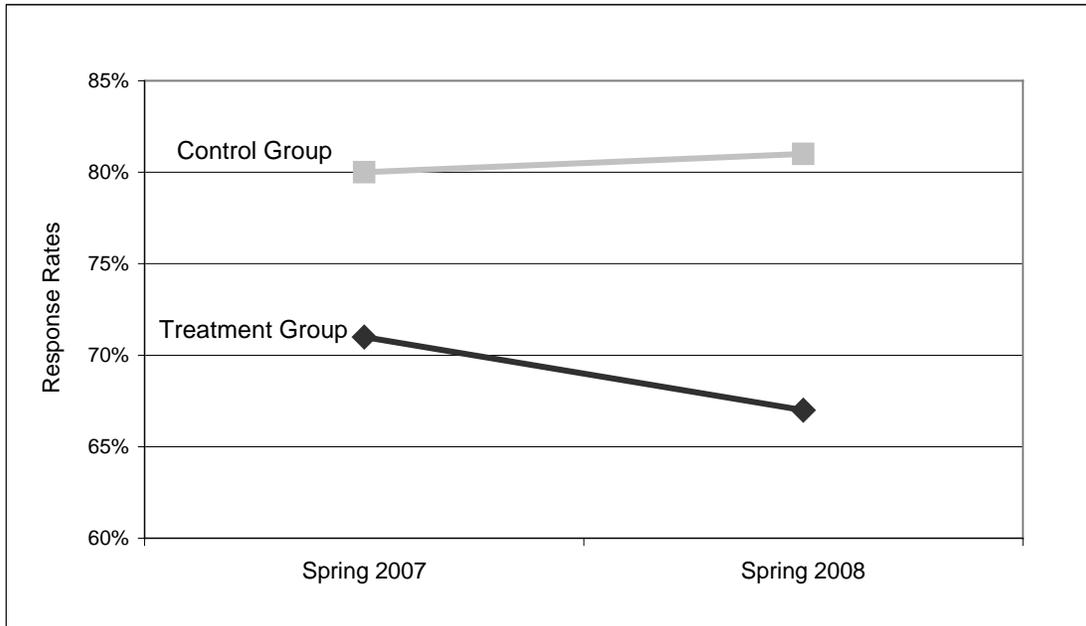


FIG 1. Course Response Rates for Online Treatment and Control Groups

between the two groups still remain after variation due to baseline differences has been removed. One of the main underlying assumptions of ANCOVA modeling is that the slopes of the regression lines for the two groups are equivalent. However, this assumption was not met in this study. The interaction term between the baseline and the group factor was significant ($p\text{-value}=.04$), indicating that the relationship between the baseline and the 2008 response rate differs between the groups (see Figure 2). Therefore, we can conclude that the baseline course response rate predicts the 2008 response rate differently for the treatment and control groups. After performing a separate regression analysis on each group, we see that the baseline response rate is a fairly good predictor of the following year's response rate in the control group (simple regression $p\text{-value}<.0001$, $R^2=.28$). The course response rate is, however, a relatively poor predictor when the mode is switched from paper in 2007 to on-line in 2008 (treatment group: simple regression $p\text{-value}=.01$, $R^2=.07$)

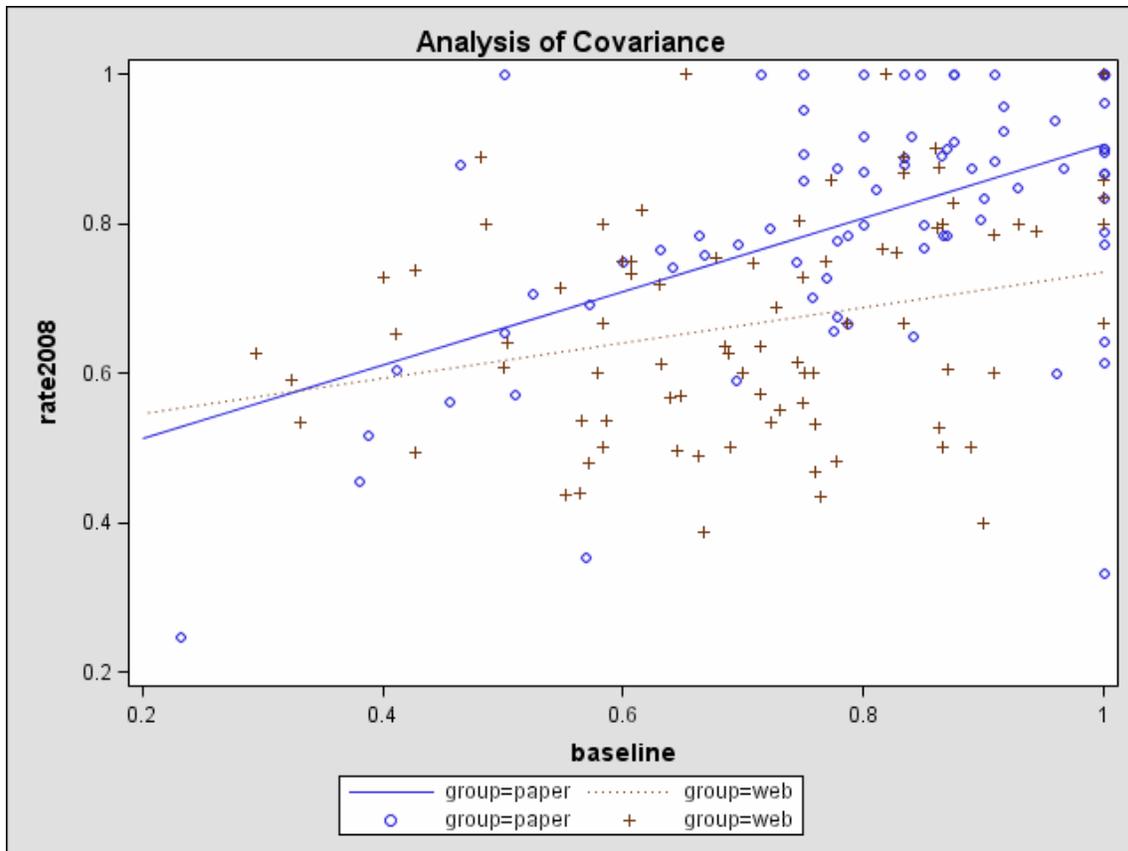


FIG 2. Scatterplot of Spring 2007 and 2008 Response Rates by Mode of Evaluation

To evaluate the response to the two different evaluation modes, we analyzed the change from the baseline for the two groups, forming paired differences of the 2007 and 2008 course response rates by group. The ANOVA on the differences in the course response rates produced a marginal p-value of .07 (see Table 4). Cohen’s *d*, a measure of the practical significance of a difference between means, was equal to 0.28, which indicates a small effect size. Cohen (1992) operationally defined a medium-sized difference between means as half a standard deviation. Therefore, we did not have strong evidence that the web-based evaluation produced a noteworthy decrease in average course response rates, although the marginal result is suggestive.

TABLE 4. ANCOVA on Mean Course Response Rates by Mode of Evaluation

Group	Number Of Courses	Spring 2007 (baseline)		Spring 2008		Average difference from the baseline (paired)	St.Dev. of the diff.
		Mode	Mean course response rate	Eval. Mode	Mean course response rate		
Control	83	Paper	0.800	Paper	0.807	0.007	0.17
Treatment	83	Paper	0.710	Online	0.666	-0.043	0.19

Student Satisfaction with the Value of the Course

There are 21 standard questions that students answer on the paper and online Teacher/Course evaluation forms. Question 20 asks students to “Rate the overall value of this course” on a four-point scale ranging from 1=Poor to 4=Excellent. To analyze student satisfaction with their course, we calculated an average score on question 20 for the Spring 2008 evaluation. To account for unanticipated variability, we used a baseline measurement on question 20, formed as the average score on question 20 in Spring 2007 for each course.

TABLE 5. ANCOVA on Overall Value of Course by Mode of Evaluation

Group	Number Of Courses	Spring 2007 (baseline)		Spring 2008		Average difference from the baseline (paired)	St.Dev. of the diff.
		Mode	Mean of the average course rating (q20)	Mode	Mean of the average course rating (q20)		
Control	83	Paper	3.37	Paper	3.40	0.03	0.33
Treatment	83	Paper	3.45	On-line	3.34	-0.11	0.31

We performed an ANCOVA on the average course score in Spring 2008 for the online treatment and control groups, using the instructor’s Spring 2007 course score as the covariate. Assumptions underlying the ANCOVA were not violated. After adjusting for the baseline course rating, courses evaluated by the traditional paper method achieved higher average course ratings on question 20 than courses evaluated by the on-line method. (ANCOVA p-value for the effect of the evaluation mode: $p=.016$; the least square means adjusted for the baseline were significantly different: 3.42 for the paper group vs. 3.31 for the web group).

Overall Quality of Teaching in the Course

Question 21 asks students to “Rate the overall quality of the teaching by the primary instructor in this course” on a four-point scale ranging from 1=Poor to 4=Excellent. After controlling for differences in the two groups’ baseline scores, we found that courses evaluated by the paper form were rated significantly higher than those rated online (3.48 versus 3.37, respectively; ANCOVA p-value for the effect of the evaluation mode=.028).

TABLE 6. ANCOVA on Quality of Teaching by Mode of Evaluation

Group	Number Of Courses	Spring 2007 (baseline)		Spring 2008		Average difference from the baseline (paired)	St.Dev. of the diff.
		Mode	Mean of the average instructor rating	Mode	Mean of the average instructor rating		
Control	83	Paper	3.41	Paper	3.44	0.02	0.33
Treatment	83	Paper	3.53	Online	3.42	-0.11	0.32

Students' Evaluations of the Online TCE Process

At the end of the online form, students were asked five questions about the online process. These items assessed students' perceptions of the online process in terms of: convenience; protection of anonymity; and ability to allow for more comments. Two items asked about preferences for completing the course ratings online. The five questions used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. Table 7 shows the frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation for each item.

TABLE 7. Students' Responses to the Evaluation of the Online Process

ITEM	N	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	Mean	S.D.
Online evaluations are more convenient to complete...	2,267	4.2	8.9	21.8	30.0	35.1	3.8	1.13
Online evaluations protect anonymity same as in-class evaluations...	2,258	2.8	7.5	25.2	35.7	28.7	3.8	1.03
The online form allowed me to make more written comments...	2,254	3.2	12.2	38.2	25.6	20.8	3.5	1.05
I would rather complete an online evaluation than take up class time with paper form.	2,251	7.4	13.3	22.6	26.2	30.5	3.6	1.25
Overall, I prefer online evaluations to the standard paper questionnaire...	2,262	5.8	10.7	24.0	28.4	31.0	3.7	1.18

The results presented in Table 7 reveal that students' experiences with the online evaluation process were fairly positive. The mean responses to each of the items were well over the mid-point (neutral; 3) of the scale. Three out of five (59.4%) students agreed or strongly agree with the statement, "Overall, I prefer the online teacher/course evaluations to the standard paper questionnaire in class." While these results are encouraging, it is unclear whether students' positive reactions to this limited online evaluation process would generalize to their having to rate four or five of their courses online. If students were asked to complete online evaluations for all of their classes, it would probably take 45 to 60 minutes of their free time, as opposed to time that they are already spending in-class. This demand upon their discretionary time might diminish their satisfaction with the online process.

Discussion

The results of this initial study are informative and fairly encouraging. Online response rates did not decline, but the results bordered on significance. Although satisfaction ratings decreased slightly, the magnitude of these declines was quite small. These findings, however, should be interpreted cautiously. First, one can reasonably question whether students' participation would remain relatively high if they were asked to take nearly an hour of their free time to rate four or more courses online in one semester. Second, limiting the study to tenured professors resulted in disproportionately fewer lower division courses in the evaluation. This raises questions about whether response rates and student satisfaction would have been impacted if greater numbers of freshmen and sophomores had participated in the study, particularly those enrolled in very large classes.

A limitation of this pilot effort is that we were unable to measure the extent to which non-response bias may have affected the results. It is possible that students who participated in the online ratings system differ in significant ways from students who did not respond to the online evaluation. For example, our preliminary research has revealed an interesting finding: of those students who completed the online evaluation in Spring 2008, a higher percentage expected As and Bs than students who completed the paper form during Spring 2007.

UK must review its options for conducting course evaluations now that the mainframe computer and its printer have been taken off-line. OIR has established an interim arrangement with NCS Pearson to pre-slug the traditional paper-based forms that will sustain the evaluation process until a long-term solution can be found. Having NCS Pearson pre-slug the forms from an emailed list of courses and instructors has three immediate consequences. First, this option will shorten the period allotted to colleges and departments for identifying courses and instructors that should be evaluated so that NCS Pearson will have sufficient time to pre-slug and mail the forms to OIR. Second, academic units will not be able to make last minute additions or corrections to their list of courses to be evaluated. In past years, OIR has made every effort to accommodate administrative omissions or mistakes, but pre-slugging the forms off-campus will greatly

reduce the flexibility of the TCE process. Finally, outsourcing the pre-slugging of evaluation forms will increase the costs of the evaluations by roughly \$5,000 per semester.

Simply adopting the latest technology for delivering course evaluations will not ensure that the results are meaningful for tenure decisions or efforts to improve instruction. As Michael Theall (2000) notes in his essay “Electronic Course Evaluation Is Not Necessarily the Solution:”

“Putting student ratings systems online purely for supposed efficiency will do nothing to improve the poor state of evaluation practice. It will only allow bad information to be misinterpreted and misused more rapidly by those who presently do so in paper-based systems. It will not improve formative evaluation simply because it is faster. It will not reduce the mythologies surrounding evaluation. It will not create confidence that evaluation is reliable, valid, or useful. It will remain no better than the system, the questionnaire, the people, and the policies that surround it. And it may create massive problems in the areas of confidentiality and privacy issues with resulting faculty resistance and hostility.”

The scope of this pilot study has not allowed for a comprehensive examination of the validity and efficiency of online course evaluations. We recommend expanding the number of participating departments and collecting a greater amount of comparative data. This deliberate approach will permit faculty and the administration to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of an online ratings system. Finally, the piloting of an online TCE process offers an opportunity for faculty and administrators to review the current evaluation questions. The items appearing on the current paper form have remained unchanged since the 1992-93 academic year. The upcoming year is an opportune time for a faculty committee to review the items and rating scales now in place and report its findings to the University Senate for possible action.

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APPENDIX A

Faculty Experiences with the Online Teacher/Course Evaluations

The Office of Institutional Research conducted an informal survey by email of the 83 faculty members who participated in the pilot study to learn about their perceptions and opinions regarding the online Teacher/Course Evaluation process. Seventeen professors (20%) responded to the five questions listed below:

1. In general, how smoothly did the online TCE process work in your course?
2. Do you have any suggestions for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of an online TCE system?
3. Did you use a strategy for improving students' response rate on the evaluations? If so, what did you do?
4. Do you have any concerns about the ability of an online TCE system to provide reliable and valid evaluation results?
5. Do you favor or oppose the use of an online TCE system for the entire campus in the future? Why?

Highlights

Of the 17 professors who responded, six opposed the use of on-line evaluations, 10 favored on-line evaluations, and one person held back judgment at this time. Without exception, those who opposed the on-line Teacher/Course Evaluations expressed concerns about the validity of the new ratings system. Most of this apprehension stemmed from the belief that only students with extreme feelings about the course would respond. For example, one professor felt that the online rating system would attract “only the conscientious or those with an axe to grind.” Another professor was concerned about who is actually responding to the survey and in what type of environment they are responding: “We have no way of ensuring that the person enrolled in the class is actually the person responding to the evaluation questionnaire, and we have no way of knowing the environment in which the responses are given... e.g., in the midst of a party? Friends gathering around and suggesting joking comments to write?” Another faculty member commented, “I see no benefit from a validity point of view in switching to online evaluations... it appears to be solely a cost-saving measure.” Other professors who opposed the alternative ratings system felt that there might be a decrease in the legitimacy of the Teacher/Course Evaluations if they were conducted solely on-line. One professor summed up this position by noting that “...the whole experience [in-class evaluation] is shrouded in a sense of purpose and earnestness that helps encourage students to take it seriously”.

Of the 10 faculty members who supported the future use of online evaluations, three also expressed concern about reliability and validity. Concerns noted by these three professors involved students who did not attend class regularly and were still given the opportunity to complete an evaluation (which may result in writing “random” comments) and a lower response rate than in-class evaluations. Most of those who favored the use of on-line evaluations supported their use due to efficiency in preserving class time and conserving

paper. Other instructors reported that they supported the online process because it is more likely to elicit useful feedback from the students and to decrease the discomfort of the evaluative situation. One professor noted: "I think its value lies partly in efficiency but mostly in the opportunity it offers students to do it at their leisure, when they have time to think about it and aren't eager to go for a cup of coffee or lunch or whatever". Further, "...it [on-line evaluation] separates it entirely from the professor. Yes, I leave the room [during in-class evaluation] but I am close by."

In regard to other questions on the survey, professors generally felt that the process went smoothly as evidenced by feedback (or lack of) received from students. Ten professors specifically reported saying to students that they would be receiving an invitation for the on-line evaluation or reminding them to complete the ratings while the evaluation window was open. A few faculty members noted confusion about when the evaluation window was open for students to complete the evaluations. Several professors provided suggestions for improving the administration of on-line evaluations. In general, professors felt that the timing of the survey was too early in the semester. Two professors suggested an incentive for students to complete the evaluations.

In conclusion, the majority of faculty members who responded to the informal survey supported the use of online evaluations. However, roughly half expressed concern about whether students who respond to an online ratings process are representative of the students taking the course. The use of in-class evaluations helps to ensure that students who complete the paper rating forms closely match the students who are enrolled. Further research is needed to shed light on the validity of the online Teacher/Course Evaluation process.