



any colleges and universities want to reduce paper, both to be more “green” and to save costs.

Moving to online course evaluations and surveys is an obvious way to help meet these goals.

But some post-secondary administrators worry that online evaluations will generate a lower response rate, eroding the worth of the exercise, and limiting the value these deliver to their institutions.

This white paper proposes some new perspectives on response rates: that online evaluations deliver better quality information and reduce the time to action, and that response rates naturally build over time.

Then it presents nine best practices you can implement at your college or university to help build response rates, as follows:

1. Communicate the benefits.
2. Promise absolute confidentiality.
3. Use student portals to encourage, remind, or compel students.
4. Provide a small incentive.
5. Select a system that’s easy to use.
6. Select a system that can scale up for your entire student population.
7. Be sensitive to cultural factors.
8. If necessary, move online in stages.
9. Act quickly to correct issues.

This paper concludes by listing the key and benefits that can result from moving to online, both for your institution and for your department.

*Online evaluations gather
better-quality data*

In-class evaluations on paper typically

On the other hand, online systems can deliver detailed reports within hours of the evaluation cycle ending. Some can even produce on-the-fly results throughout the process.

So although response rates from online evaluations may be lower, results will be delivered faster. This gives more time to discuss and act on any findings, and to reassure students that their voices are indeed being heard.

Online evaluations build better response rates over time

The key factors that help drive response rates are shown in Figure 1. To build response rates, colleges and universities

How “intelligent confidentiality” can help build response rates

Any properly designed system will block anyone from seeing which evaluations came from which student; not even a top system administrator or dean can get past its security measures.

Yet the evaluation database does hold personally identifiable information linked to each student ID.

And there are some cases where a weean can get

Best practice #3: Use student portals

Student portals can be used at three different levels to encourage, remind, or compel students to finish their online evaluations.

Level 1: Encouraging students through portal integration

At the mildest level, students can complete their online evaluations from a new function in the student portal.

This simply provides students with convenient access to another service, with no attempt to compel them to action.

Level 2: Annoying students through portal reminders

At this level, students are reminded about any overdue evaluations every time they access the portal. This mild annoyance helps compel them to action.

But always remember: A higher response rate driven by annoyance may deliver lower-quality responses. Students may answer simply to get rid of the reminders, rather than to provide honest feedback.

Level 3: Compelling students through portal blocking

At the most severe level, students cannot get their grades until they complete all course evaluations.

This approach will yield response rates similar to in-class evaluations, but the quality of these responses will likely be no better.

By compelling students to answer, you may not get honest or thoughtful responses.

Best practice #4: Provide a small incentive

One study found that while response rates did drop somewhat for online versus in-class evaluations, there is a straightforward way to restore the balance.

The study concluded, “If one wishes to achieve online response rates that are similar to in-class response rates, a very mild incentive should be offered.”⁵

In this case, offering students a very small grade incentive, such as 1/4 of a percent (0.25% on a grade of 100%) erased the difference in response rates between online and in-class evaluations.

Before being implemented, this kind of incentive would likely need to be blessed by the department or the entire faculty, but it costs nothing to a college, and is clearly effective at motivating students.

Best practice #5: Select a system that's easy to use

One reason some moves to online have failed in the past is because they were hard to use. With growing computer literacy, this issue is less critical today.

But you must make certain that your online system demands no learning curve. And your questionnaires must be built so they are clear and simple to fill out.

Together these measures remove any confusion that can limit response rates.

Every vendor will tell you their system is easy to use; make sure to get demos that prove it. Some web-based systems are easy to use, only because they are so limited in functionality. Don't allow ease of use to replace the powerful analysis and flexible reporting that you need.

5: Curt J. Dommeyer et al. “Gathering faculty teaching evaluations by in-class and online surveys: their effects on response rates and evaluations,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, October 2004, p. 619

Best practice #6: Select a system that can scale up for your entire student population

Fast response is vital to prevent lag time and to accommodate everyone who wants to fill in an evaluation at the same time. If there is an unacceptable wait between questions or screens, students will abandon the process, and response rates will drop.

Consider a typical university with 10,000 different sections and an average class size of 25. To evaluate every section means gathering 250,000 responses. And if every student takes an average of five courses, a

Computer literacy

Most students in the developed world know how to browse the web and fill in on-screen forms. But in certain settings, or for certain students, this may not be the case. Provide extra instructions or a paper option so that no one is left behind because of a lack of computer literacy.

Best practice #8: If necessary, move online in stages

You may need to move to online in incremental steps, rather than at all once. It's feasible to run a pilot project, or to designate some portion of your courses to be evaluated online in the first round.

Here are three specific strategies for phasing in online evaluations in stages, rather than all at once.

Do some evaluations on paper, some online

You can use a mix of paper and online questionnaires, as long as your system supports both, so that paper questionnaires are easy to scan in. Then do your analysis online for more powerful processing and flexible reporting.

The first year, start with a mix of perhaps 60:40 or 80:20 paper:online, then nudge up the ratio in following years until you reach 100 percent online.

Send students to a computer lab

Some institutions are not ready to use e-mail for online evaluations. In this case, you could use your computer labs. At the end of each course, schedule students to go to the lab to fill in their evaluations.

In following years, after everyone is comfortable with this process, you can enable students to use e-mails for doing evaluations. Of course, your system should be able to encrypt all e-mails related to course evaluations.

Bring portable systems to the class

Instead of sending students to a computer lab, another approach is to bring online questionnaires to them. You can load PDAs, tablet PCs, or laptops with the online course evaluations, then bring them to the classroom. Students can use these devices on the spot, or take them away and return them with their evaluations complete.

This approach is only feasible for a small student population, since it demands many hardware devices and very tight control over their distribution. Such high overhead may well cancel out the benefits of the move to online evaluations.

Best practice #9: Act quickly to correct issues

Nothing builds trust better than showing students how your institution acts quickly on the results of online evaluations.

Proving to students that you are listening and taking action on their concerns is probably the single best way to improve response rates.

Once students perceive that your college is taking steps to correct any issues they raise, they will more likely take part in the next online evaluations, and your response rates will gradually improve over time.



When students feel your institution is taking action on the issues they raise, they are more likely to do online evaluations, and give many more comments.

Online evaluations deliver both operational and strategic benefits

Following these best practices can deliver both operational and strategic benefits to any college or university that moves to online evaluations.

The operational benefits

Online course evaluations can deliver strong operational benefits to your college or university, including:

a **Cost savings** for printing, distributing, scanning, rekeying, filing, and archiving paper forms; after system startup, these savings can be at least 50 percent of the ongoing costs

a **Time savings**, with no need to inquire about basic demographics, since the system is already aware of these facts (*see sidebar on intelligent confidentiality*)

a **Flexibility** that can accommodate faculty-level and course-level questions; these questions can be added to surveys by individual faculty or departments to study particular issues of interest

a **Integration** since the new process likely replaces a patchwork of departmental systems with one modern, centralized system

a **Customization** when you need to update survey questionnaires, design new reports, or track trends over time.

All these operational benefits save time, save money, add flexibility, and create better results. To most college and university administrators, all these operational benefits more than make up for any dip in response rates.

The strategic benefits

Moving to online evaluations can also provide many strategic benefits that enhance the value of the IR group, including:

a **Alignment** aligned with your institution's environmental goals

a **Efficiency** since much less time is required for creating reports manually

a **Integration** and other HR programs; IR can now deliver strategic information in time to be used by decision-makers

a **Transparency** if desired, so that students can review previous course evaluations before they register each year

a **Feedback**, thanks to the more detailed feedback now available.

All these strategic benefits enable the IR department to make a more visible and significant contribution to your college or university. These strategic benefits can help bring in a new era in the role of the IR n Tw{moresfbew(R)-. n(line ev03 labsdualTj8Tj/TT2 4 Tm