TASK FORCE ON STUDENT EVALUATION OF COURSES

FINAL REPORT
MAY 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of the Provost's Task Force on Student Evaluation of Courses was to develop a plan to increase response rates to student course surveys. The Task Force found that students: (1) are unclear about the benefits of completing student course surveys, (2) share several misconceptions about when their feedback is released to faculty and how the information is used, and (3) have concerns about how they receive information about student course surveys and about the procedures for completing them.

The Task Force recommends a two-pronged approach to increasing response rates. The first prong is student-focused and includes both an education component and a social media component. The education component should communicate to students that their feedback matters and cannot be used against them. It should involve a coordinated series of messages explaining what student course surveys are and how students' ratings are used. It could also involve creating a Canvas course/training module about student course surveys. The social media component should include social media posts and printed materials reminding students that it is time for their voices to be heard. The dates of availability should be posted with messaging highlighting the importance we place on students' anonymity. The campaign could end with a "Thank You" event to acknowledge we appreciate their feedback.

The second prong is faculty-focused. Messaging about student course surveys (e.g., best practices for achieving high response rates, the value of students having a voice) should be included in communications faculty already receive from other offices. Faculty should also be encouraged to tailor the optional student course survey questions toward their unique course experiences. Taken together, these recommendations for students and faculty should lead to a shift in how students and faculty view student course surveys.

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COMMITTEE CHARGE

In an email dated March 1, 2024, Provost and Associate Vice President Dr. David Shaw described our charge as follows:

"Two years ago a task force revised the student evaluation of courses. At that time we indicated we would evaluate the instrument to determine if adjustments should be made. Since then, student responses have not been sufficient to adequately evaluate the survey questions themselves. Therefore, I am organizing a new committee to determine adjustments that should be made in how the surveys are administered so that we can have a better picture of student responses to the effectiveness of the courses they take. This committee will be composed of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students to develop recommendations on implementation, and best practices to ensure maximum student participation."

PROCEDURES

The primary goals of this committee were to identify evidence-based strategies to increase response rates to student course surveys, choose strategies to adopt, and devise plans for implementing those strategies.

Committee members reviewed the final report of the Fall 2020 Task Force on Evaluation of Teaching Performance, as well as resources from other universities and peer-reviewed journal articles. Faculty committee members discussed their experiences administering student course surveys and solicited information from their peers. Student committee members described their perceptions of student course surveys, as well as those of their undergraduate and graduate peers.

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FINDINGS

Common Strategies to Increase Student Participation in Course Surveys

After reviewing the final report of the Fall 2020 Task Force on Evaluation of Teaching Performance and other academic resources, the committee identified several strategies commonly used to increase response rates to student course surveys. These include the following (Berk, 2012; Chapman & Jones, 2017; Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, n.d.; University at Buffalo, 2008):

1. *Communicating the benefits* - Encouraging instructors to talk with their students about the importance of student course surveys and about how they and the institution will use the feedback.
2. *Integrating into Canvas* - Enabling students to access student course surveys through Canvas, reducing the need for multiple emails.
3. *Using class time* - Encouraging instructors to reserve a few minutes in class to complete student course surveys.
4. *Ensuring anonymity* - Reminding students that their responses cannot be traced back to them, reducing concerns about retaliation for poor reviews.
5. *Changing the description/name of the survey* - Avoiding the "class climate" description (a source of confusion about the purpose of the survey), which should happen with the new management system/company conducting the survey.
6. *Integrating into campus culture* - Promoting the idea that completing student course surveys is expected and a key component of campus culture.

Feedback from Undergraduate and Graduate Students

Committee members also contacted undergraduate and graduate students with the following questions: (1) Why aren't students motivated to complete course evaluations? (2) What do students think course evaluations are used for? (3) What would motivate students to complete course evaluations? The feedback we received from students included the following:

1. Why aren't students motivated to complete course evaluations?

▪ "It's the end of the semester and students are unwilling to do any extra work, even if it is meant to be for their own benefit. The focus is on finals and maintaining/raising their grades more than anything, and the brainpower they expect is required to fill out the surveys is not worth it when they have no real reason to believe that their answers are being considered. I have also heard people express concern that if they submit their evaluations before finals are over, their professor will be able to see it and might reduce

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> their grades on their finals if they write anything negative or constructive. Then, if you say you will wait until after finals are over, you are less likely to end up doing it because you are in the mindset of summer vacation."

- "Because they are super long and many students don't see direct reflections of the results of the surveys."
- "There are too many emails sent out about them."
- "People don't feel the need to complete them unless their professor was bad."
- "If people fill them out and see no change, they are less likely to continue filling them out."
- "The password is a barrier. People see that they need to enter a password and don't want to bother going back to the email to see what the password is."
- "For bigger general ed. classes, I don't feel the need to fill it out because anything I say will be negative."
- "They are lengthy – if it could get shortened to 'what worked' and 'what didn't work' it would be easier."
- "At the end of the semester, my mind is on classes, finals, and anything but filling out a survey. If we have to do it on our own time, we will not be motivated to do it."
- "It seems like the professors only care to the extent that their administrators make them."

2. What do students think course evaluations are used for?

- "I personally always assumed that the surveys went straight to the professor, who may or may not care about any suggestions I might have. Especially for professors who don't seem very dedicated, I assume that they will not pay attention to any survey results they might receive."
- "To decide which teachers will get to continue teaching in the way that they are currently teaching/evaluating in the specific structures of the classroom."
- "Some people think the name is misleading and that the surveys are about environmental climate."
- "To see what professors can do better."
- "To either recommend or critique professors from the top down."
- "If professors don't believe they performed their best, they are less likely to encourage students to fill out the evaluations."

3. What would motivate students to complete course evaluations?

- "I always complete my course evaluations, but I am more likely to do it in a timely manner if a few minutes in class are dedicated to letting students complete the evaluations. I've had professors give us a moment to do the survey and leave the room so

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that we felt free to write whatever we needed to and I felt no pressure to be nicer/less intentional with my answers because the professor was near."

- "If they saw more direct changes in the class. More transparency when it comes to the results (not exact but a ballpark-type thing). An explanation as to why we need to take these surveys instead of the constant email reminders."
- "Offering bonus points to students who complete the surveys."
- "People rarely do things that are as tedious as the class climate survey out of the goodness of their heart. I have found bonus points motivate people, as does seeing change in the next year's class."
- "If the survey was able to be sent out through Canvas by the professor, you could eliminate the password since they would already have to be logged in via Canvas. Would also be helpful if this was a link to each student's list of all surveys (for every class)."
- "If the professor says they read the evaluations and that they pay attention to the answers, I am more likely to fill it out."
- "More people might be willing to take a mid-semester survey because it would seem more likely that the professor would consider changes mid-semester."
- "At Ole Miss, the students that fill out the teacher surveys are able to see their final grade for the semester 24 hours early."
- "Giving people a meal voucher if they fill out the survey."
- "Your name gets put in a raffle if you fill out your surveys - maybe for a season football ticket."
- "I think it might increase response rate if it was on paper in a class period."

Key Findings

Three themes emerged from the committee's deliberations and the information provided by undergraduate and graduate students.

1. *Students are unclear about the benefits of completing student course surveys.*

   Students do not understand why the information in the student course surveys matters. They see no direct or indirect benefit to completing them and do not believe faculty are interested in the feedback. For example, we received the following feedback from students:

   > "It's the end of the semester and students are unwilling to do any extra work, even if it is meant to be for their own benefit. The focus is on finals and maintaining/raising their grades more than anything, and the brainpower they expect is required to fill out the surveys is not worth it when they have no real reason to believe that their answers are being considered.

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> "If people fill them out and see no change, they are less likely to continue filling them out."

> "If the professor says they read the evaluations and that they pay attention to the answers, I am more likely to fill it out."

2. *Students share several misconceptions about when student course surveys are released to faculty and how the information is used.*

Related to when student feedback is released, students were concerned that their responses to student course surveys might be used against them by retaliatory faculty members. For example, one student stated the following:

> "I have also heard people express concern that if they submit their evaluations before finals are over, their professor will be able to see it and might reduce their grades on their finals if they write anything negative or constructive. Then, if you say you will wait until after finals are over, you are less likely to end up doing it because you are in the mindset of summer vacation."

Students were also confused about the purpose of student course surveys and how their feedback was used. One student reported the following:

> "Some people think the name is misleading and that the surveys are about environmental climate."

Regarding the purpose of their feedback, students believed it was used as follows:

> "To decide which teachers will get to continue teaching in the way that they are currently teaching/evaluating in the specific structures of the classroom."

> "To either recommend or critique professors from the top down."

3. *Students reported concerns about how they receive information about student course surveys and about the procedures for completing them.*

One of the biggest complaints we heard from students was that they received too many emails about student course surveys, making it difficult to pay attention to them, especially when they prefer to communicate via social media. They also stated that because the end of the semester is such a busy time, they tend to ignore anything that is not already on their agenda. These findings highlight the need to communicate early and

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through social media. Some of the feedback we received from students included the following:

"There are too many emails sent out about them."

"The password is a barrier. People see that they need to enter a password and don't want to bother going back to the email to see what the password is."

"They are lengthy – if it could get shortened to 'what worked' and 'what didn't work' it would be easier."

"At the end of semester, my mind is on classes, finals, and anything but filling out a survey. If we have to do it on our own time, we will not be motivated to do it."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, we recommend a two-pronged approach to increasing response rates to student course surveys. The first prong focuses on students and includes both an education component and a social media component. The second prong focuses on faculty. Targeting both student and faculty audiences will be essential to shifting attitudes and behaviors surrounding student course surveys.

Student Campaign 1 – Education Component

With a goal of achieving 65% student participation (see University at Buffalo, 2008), an education campaign is in order. The messaging for this campaign should communicate to students that their feedback matters and cannot be used against them.

Beginning the first week of classes, MSU should deliver a coordinated series of messages explaining what student course surveys are and how student ratings are used. These messages could highlight award-winning faculty (e.g., Grisham, Giles) and acknowledge that faculty recognition of excellence is often a result of student feedback. There could also be messages showcasing changes to curriculum that result from student feedback (e.g., new programs, concentrations, or even degrees). Messaging should also focus on students' ability to "leave their mark" (and "rate responsibly") for future Bulldogs by providing feedback. When students are registering for classes, they can view information about the courses they are considering and the professors who teach them (i.e., the grade distribution and percentage of students recommending the course to others), but only if 30% or more of enrolled students completed the student course surveys. Messages should remind students of this additional benefit.

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This campaign could also involve creating a Canvas course/training module with a series of short videos about student course surveys. The videos could include a wide range of speakers, including Drs. Keenum and Shaw, faculty, and students. The purpose of the course/training module would be to educate students about what student course surveys are and why they are important. More specifically, it would involve clarifying that student course surveys matter (e.g., to students, faculty, and administrators) and that student course surveys cannot hurt them (e.g., by emphasizing that responses are anonymous and clarifying that the timing of responses will not adversely affect students' grades).

This campaign should run throughout the semester, culminating in Student Campaign 2.

Student Campaign 2 – Social Media Component

Beginning the week before student course surveys go live, social media posts (which could include graphics and short videos) and printed materials should remind students that the time is coming for their voices to be heard (i.e., for students to "leave their mark"). The dates of availability should be posted with messaging highlighting the importance we place on students' anonymity and our understanding that without it the process will not work.

The campaign could end with a "Thank You" event such as ice cream on the Drill Field at the close of student course surveys. This event could coincide with final exams and might facilitate a shift in students' perceptions as they realize we appreciate their feedback, especially at a time when we know they are already busy and stressed.

Both student campaigns will likely have some secondary influence on faculty, but a separate campaign should be directed at the latter audience.

Faculty Campaign

For faculty, messaging about student course surveys could be included in communications they already receive from other offices (e.g., their department and/or college, the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Provost's Office). These messages could include information about best practices for achieving high response rates, as well as the value of students having a voice (both for students and for the information it provides faculty about what worked well in their courses). Faculty should also be encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity they have to tailor the optional questions toward their unique course experiences.

Taken together, these recommendations should lead to a shift in how students and faculty view student course surveys. Change will not happen overnight, but the education and social media components we described should begin to move us in the right direction.

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RESOURCES

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