

# Online Student Course Evaluations: Strategies for Increasing Student Participation Rates

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Research Parameters & Methodology
- II. Executive Overview
- III. Increasing Student Response Rates for Online  
Course Evaluations
- IV. Improving Course Evaluation Questionnaires
- V. Use of Data Collected in Course Evaluations for  
Promotion and Tenure Decisions

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# I. RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND METHODOLOGY

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## Project Challenge

A midsize private university in the South approached the Council with the following questions:

### ***Administration of Course Evaluations:***

- *Is it more typical for institutions to use paper-and-pencil or online systems for course evaluations?*
- *For course evaluations that are completed out of class, what incentives have institutions found successful for motivating students to complete the evaluations?*
- *How do institutions make information collected in course evaluations available to students, such that students feel that the information is receiving attention from the administration?*

### ***Questionnaires:***

- *Have institutions had success using differentiated types of questionnaires that vary according to the type of instruction used in the course (e.g. lecture, seminar, laboratory, studio, etc. ) and/or that vary according to the discipline (e.g. arts and sciences, engineering, business, law)?*
- *How have institutions implemented these various assessments while also collecting data that is uniform and comparable from across the institution? Are there questionnaires, or individual questions, that are recognized as successful?*

### ***Use of Data Collected in Course Evaluations for Promotion and Tenure Decisions:***

- *What percentage of institutions use the data collected in course evaluations for promotion and tenure decisions? How is this data factored into promotion and tenure decisions? What has the experience been for institutions using information collected in course evaluations for promotion and tenure decisions?*

# I. RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND METHODOLOGY

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## Sources

- National Center for Education Statistics <http://nces.ed.gov>
- The Chronicle of Higher Education <http://chronicle.com>
- Haskell, Robert E (1997). *Academic Freedom, Tenure, and Student Evaluation of Faculty: Galloping Polls In The 21st Century*. Education Policy Analysis Archives. Vol. 5 Num. 6
- Anderson, Heidi, Eleanora Bird, and Jeff Cain. *Online Student Course Evaluations: Review of Literature and a Pilot Study*. American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education. Vol. 69 Num. 1. 31 Jan. 2005. University of Kentucky.
- Clark, Susan, Trav Johnson, and Christian Reiner. *Online Course-Ratings and the Personnel Evaluation Standards*. Online Assessment, Measurement, and Evaluation: Emerging Practices. Idea Group, 2005.
- Various university websites

## Research Parameters

- This research brief profiles midsize, private and public research-intensive institutions.
- The majority of contacts interviewed for this brief were directors of assessment and institutional research.
- For the purposes of this report, “student response rate” is defined as the percentage of students who filled out one or more course evaluations in a given semester.

# I. RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND METHODOLOGY

A Guide to the Universities Profiled in this Brief				
Institution	Location	Classification/ Affiliation	Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate)	Carnegie Classification
University A	Large City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University B	Large City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University C	Midsize City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University D	Large City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University E	Midsize City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University F	Large City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University G	Midsize City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University H	Small Suburb	Public	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University I	Midsize City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Research Universities
University J	Large City	Private	Withheld to preserve anonymity	Doctoral/Research Universities

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

## **II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **Introduction**

Since the 1960's, student course evaluations have been used to evaluate faculty teaching. A 1993 study of 600 liberal arts colleges nationally found that 86% use course evaluations as a component in formal evaluations of faculty for salary, promotion and tenure decisions (Haskell, 1997). With institutions pressing for increased standards for faculty teaching, student course evaluations are fast becoming the primary tool for formal evaluations of faculty teaching.

### **Problems with Paper-based Course Evaluations**

Traditional paper-based course evaluations bear numerous institutional costs. Compiling results and student comments from paper-based course evaluations requires a substantial investment of staff time and resources. Administering course evaluations in the classroom setting limits the amount of time students are able to dedicate to the evaluations and requires devoting a portion of class time to completing the evaluations. Additionally, the classroom setting poses limitations on the effectiveness of the evaluations. Students often complain of being unable to contribute thoughtful comments in a short timeframe. Additionally, when the results of course evaluations are not available to students, students often question the impact course evaluations have on faculty teaching.

### **Transitioning to Online Course Evaluations**

Institutions began experimenting with online course evaluation systems in the late 1990's, and online course evaluations are becoming increasingly popular for several reasons, including substantial savings to the institution, lower turnaround time to deliver results to faculty and students, and increased ability to perform statistical analyses with course evaluation data. Additionally, research suggests online course evaluations provide more substantive feedback from students. A 2005 study at a large university in the Southeast found that students who complete course evaluations online are much more likely to provide comments about their course and instructor than students evaluating courses through a traditional paper-based system, and that the total number of words typed per student in open-text responses was more than seven times that of student using the paper-based system (Anderson, Bird, Cain, 2005.)

The primary drawback to converting to an online course evaluation system is the significant decline in student participation rates that institutions often experience. The absence of a controlled environment in which to administer course evaluations leaves institutions with the burden of working to increase student participation rates in order for the course evaluations to be valid for formal evaluations of faculty teaching.

### **Managing Student Response Rates**

Low participation rates for student course evaluations reflect student perceptions that the evaluations are not valued by the institution. As such, institutions can improve participation rates by demonstrating that course evaluations are important to both the institution as a whole, as well as to individual faculty members. The following brief outlines various strategies that other institutions used to affect a change in student perceptions about course evaluations and increase response rates.

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Key Observations

**The majority of contact institutions use online course evaluation systems.** Of the ten institutions contacted, eight have online course evaluation systems and two have paper-based evaluations. One of the two institutions using paper-based course evaluations ran an online course evaluation pilot program, but ultimately decided against transitioning to an online system due to the anticipated drop in student participation.

**Across institutions using online course evaluations, student participation rates range from 35% to 85%.** Institutions that converted from paper-based to online course evaluations experienced a drop in participation rates of 5% to 30% in the first year of online course evaluation implementation.

**All contacts recommend sending periodic email reminders to students throughout the evaluation period.** All institutions send some form of email reminder to students at least twice during the evaluation period.

**The majority of contact institutions with online course evaluation systems publish the results of the course evaluations online.** Students are allowed to see university-wide statistical averages for at least a portion of evaluation questions. A few institutions also post students' written comments online.

**Of the ten institutions contacted, only two institutions have differentiated questionnaires by individual college.** The majority of contacts state that there are few advantages to differentiating questionnaires at the individual college level because data that is produced from multiple questionnaires is not comparable across the institution.

**Several contact institutions allow individual faculty or departments to add additional customized questions to the course evaluation questionnaires.**

**Nearly all contact institutions factor course evaluations into tenure and promotion considerations.** Most contact institutions use course evaluations as a component of their evaluation of faculty teaching. Contacts recommend the use of additional assessment techniques such as peer evaluations and written student testimony to supplement faculty teaching portfolios. No institution uses a precise formula for factoring course evaluation results into tenure and promotion decisions.

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

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Institution	Online / Paper-Based	First Year of Online Evaluations	Paper-based Response Rate	First-year Online Response Rate	Current Response Rate
University A	Online	2004	95%	72%	75%
University B	Online	2008	80%	71%	71%
University C	Online	2002	75%	60%	70%
University D	Online	2007	75%	50%	55%
University E	Online	2005	95%	65%	74%
University F	Online	2005	60%	54%	43%
University G	Online	2005	75%	70%	85%
University H	Online	2009	65%	35%	35%
University I	Paper-based	N/A	80%	N/A	80%
University J	Paper-based	N/A	75%	N/A	75%

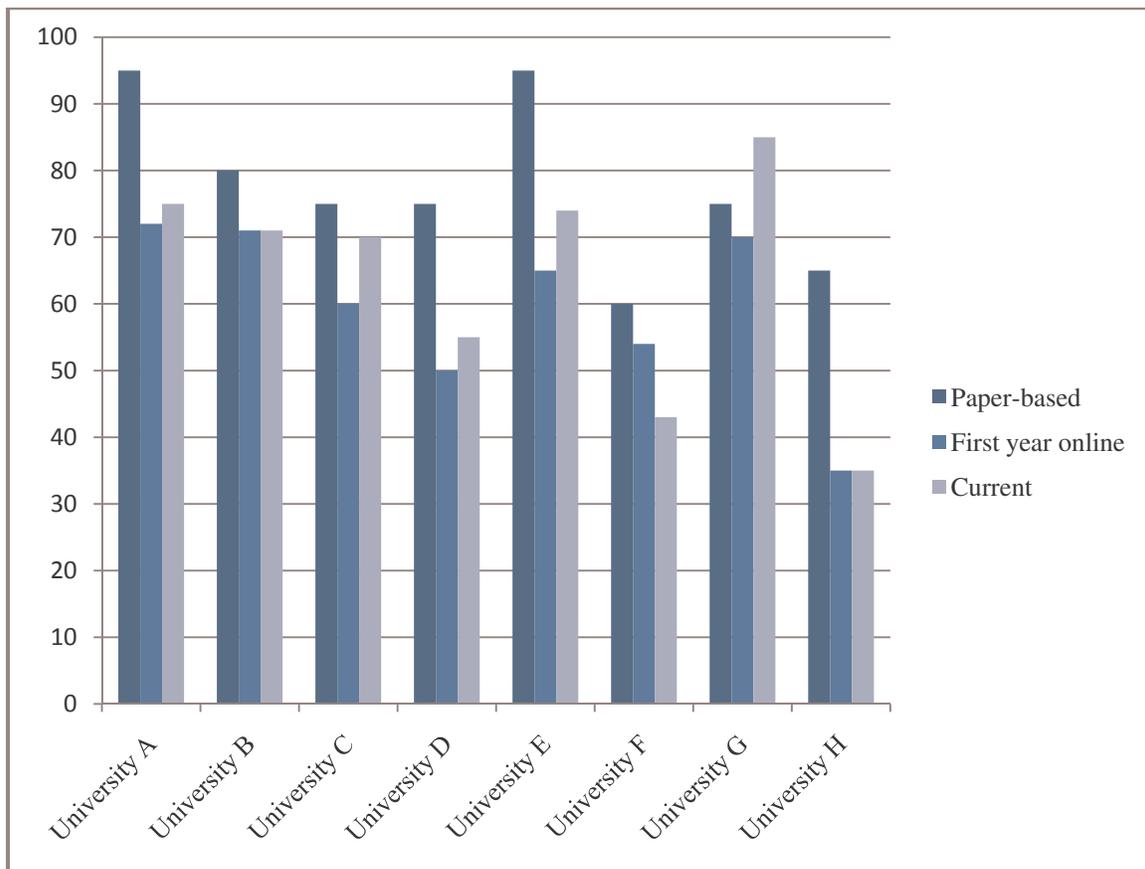
\*Figures for the University H are based on a pilot semester for the College of Arts and Sciences

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

#### Drop in Student Response Rates after Implementation of Online Course Evaluations

All contact institutions experienced a drop in student response rates after converting to an online course evaluation system, followed by a gradual recovery of response rates. Across contact institutions, the average initial drop in student response rates was 16.8% for the first year after the institution converted to online course evaluations. Response rates at the majority of contact institutions then gradually increased over a period of several years after converting to the online system.

Response Rates across Contact Institutions



### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

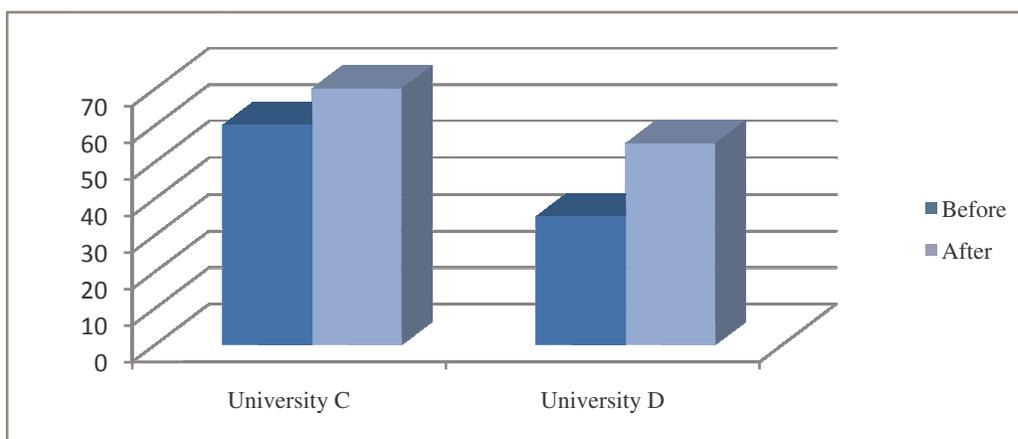
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#### Publishing the Results of Student Course Evaluations

Contacts agree that publishing student course evaluation results online in an easy-to-access format is an effective way to boost participation rates. At the majority of contact institutions that make evaluation results available to students, students are allowed to view course evaluation results for the entire university. As an incentive for students to complete course evaluations, contacts recommend making the evaluation results available to students only after they have completed their own course evaluations.

**University C** and **University D** began publishing student results online in 2002 and 2007 respectively and noticed a significant increase in student response rates over a few years.

#### Publishing Course Evaluations Online: Response Rate Increases at Two Institutions



*“If faculty members resist posting results online, you have to ask them: ‘Would you rather students get this kind of evaluative information from websites like Pick-A-Prof and RateMyProfessor, or would you rather it came from the institution?’ You can’t just send student evaluations to a vault in the student government office; the internet is the only way to give students access to their evaluation results.”*

*- Associate Provost for Institutional Research and Assessment  
University B*

#### Contacts advise *against* the following:

- **Publishing Course Evaluation Results of Teaching Assistants:** Institutions recommend against publishing the results to any questions that involve evaluation of a teaching assistant or graduate student instructor. Contacts at **University G** note that though students may petition otherwise, publicizing graduate student evaluations could be potentially damaging to graduate students.
- **Providing Information on Specific Statistics to Students:** Contacts at **University E** state that giving students access to course evaluation statistics relating to gender and race of students completing the evaluations can have potentially damaging effects on student enrollment in a course. Contacts at most institutions recommend allowing students to see the course, instructor, and university-wide averages.

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

Institution	Total # of Questions on Survey	Results Made Available to Students	Student Access to Written Comments?	System for Distribution
University A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students can view results to all questions</li> </ul>	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results are posted on the course evaluation website</li> </ul>
University C	23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students can view results to four questions that concern student assessment of learning, e.g.:</li> <li>Course materials were effective in helping students learn</li> <li>I learned a great deal in this course</li> </ul>	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results are posted on the course evaluation website</li> </ul>
University D	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students can view results to all questions</li> </ul>	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results are posted on the course evaluation website</li> </ul>
University E	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students can view results to four questions that assess students' personal assessment of the course, e.g.:</li> <li>What was the degree of difficulty for the course?</li> </ul>	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results are posted on the course registration website</li> <li>Students can view evaluation results when selecting courses</li> <li>Faculty members can choose not to make students' written comments for their courses public</li> </ul>
University F	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students can view results to all questions</li> </ul>	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results are posted on the course evaluation website</li> </ul>
University G	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students can view results to two questions that reflect students' personal assessment of the course, e.g.:</li> <li>What was your overall assessment of this course?</li> <li>Would you recommend this course to another student?</li> </ul>	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results are posted on the course registration website</li> <li>Students can view evaluation results when selecting courses</li> </ul>
University H	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each college selects five questions to be made available to students</li> </ul>	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results are sent to student government office</li> <li>Faculty members can choose not to make evaluation results for their courses public</li> </ul>

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

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#### Spotlight: Publishing Student Comments

In addition to publishing student responses for multiple choice questions, **University D** and **University E** publish student comments online. At both institutions, student comments are published anonymously.

**Editing Student Comments before Publication:** Contacts at University D and University E state that before student comments are published online they must undergo a thorough editing process. At both institutions, student comments are released to faculty members before they are posted online. Faculty members can then request that certain comments remain unpublished due to offensive or explicit content.

At University D and University E, student comments are not published under the following circumstances:

- Any coarse or violent language and/or content
- Remarks about the faculty member's appearance, dress, sex, race, etc.
- Content that is personally offensive to faculty members

If a faculty member finds any student comments objectionable, she must discuss the removal of the comments with the department chair or the dean of the college.

Contacts at both institutions stress that student comments should not be removed because of extreme content or on the basis of faculty displeasure. Contacts at University E note that student comments about the course, including negative assessments of a faculty member's instruction and teaching style, will not be held from publication because of resistance from faculty members.

**Giving Faculty Options:** University E gives faculty members the option of declining to have student comments for a course published online. When faculty members register their courses at the beginning of the semester they must submit a request that student comments for the course not appear online. Student comments are published for all courses unless faculty members request otherwise. Contacts state that so far the majority of faculty members are receptive to publishing student comments online. In spring 2009, only 16.7% of faculty members declined to allow the publication of student comments.

Additionally, University E introduced a feature on the course registration website that allows faculty members to respond to the student comments for the course. The feature is popular among faculty who initially resisted the idea of publishing student comments online. Faculty comments appear alongside student comments about the course.

**Results:** Contacts at both institutions report that, though the move to publish student course evaluation results online was controversial among faculty members, students are showing increased interest in participating in the course evaluation process. Contacts at University D report a significant increase in student response rates overall, and more students are electing to submit comments about their courses and instructors. Contacts note that the most surprising result of the practice is that students are investing more time in writing comments about their courses, and the volume of offensive comments has declined significantly. Contacts speculate that, because students are aware that comments using foul language are not published, students have been more thoughtful and less offensive in their assessments of faculty members.

*"Once the faculty realized the world wouldn't come crashing to an end if their comments were published online, they were generally quite accepting. We find that publishing students' comments really gives students the sense that their opinions are being taken seriously."*

- Registrar  
University E

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

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#### Sending Email Reminders to Students throughout the Course Evaluation Period

Contacts at the majority of institutions recommend sending students periodic email reminders throughout the course evaluation period. According to contacts, such emails should include the following:

- Submission deadlines for the course evaluation period
- A link to the course evaluation website
- Information on any prizes or giveaways students may receive for filling out their course evaluations

Contacts note that emails from high-level university officials such as the president and college deans are important for convincing students that course evaluations are important to the institution. Contacts at **University E** found that emails from the registrar have the most substantial impact on student response rates.

Additionally, contacts at **University A** state that student groups are a particularly effective means of reaching a large portion of the student body. The administration encourages organizations such as the student government, the Greek community, and all residential advisors to send email reminders about course evaluations to all students on their respective mailing lists.

*“Students might complain about the spam, but email reminders really do work. They are most effective when they come from the faculty, the administration, and student leaders on campus, as it shows a commitment to assessment on behalf of the entire institution.”*

- *Dean of Undergraduate Research  
University A*

#### Email Reminders from Faculty Members

Contacts agree that email reminders from faculty members are most effective for courses with fewer than thirty students. At **University A**, faculty members who send email reminders to their students several times throughout the evaluation period regularly receive 90% student response rates. Additionally, contacts at **University F** state that faculty members who send out email reminders to students generally have higher participation rates by as much as 15-20%.

Contacts recommend that the university administration encourage professors to send emails to all students in their course sections at the outset of the course evaluation period. The dean of the faculty at **University E** emails all faculty members before the course evaluation period opens to ensure that all faculty members are prompted to email their students when the course evaluation period begins.

*“It’s important for faculty members to understand that emailing their students is critical to increasing student response rates. Course evaluations can’t succeed at the macro level without a strong commitment from individual faculty members.”*

- *Registrar  
University E*

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

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Institution	Primary Senders	Primary Recipients	Email Frequency
University A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Department administrators</li> <li>Residential Advisors</li> <li>Student Groups</li> <li>Athletic Council</li> <li>High-level university administrators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student groups send emails to all group mailing lists</li> <li>High-level administrators send mass emails to all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All administrators send one mass email to their respective constituencies at the start of the evaluation period</li> <li>After the first week, the office of assessment emails all students who have not filled out all their course evaluations</li> </ul>
University B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Office of Institutional Research and Assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mass email sent to all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emails are sent periodically to all students 2-3 times per evaluation period</li> </ul>
University C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mass email sent to all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All students receive an email at the start of the evaluation period</li> <li>After the first week, director of CTL emails all students who have not filled out all their course evaluations</li> </ul>
University D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Registrar</li> <li>Dean of the Faculty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mass email sent to all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emails are sent periodically to all students 2-3 times per evaluation period</li> </ul>
University E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dean of the College</li> <li>Dean of the Graduate School</li> <li>Director of Center for Learning and Teaching</li> <li>Dean of Faculty</li> <li>Registrar</li> <li>University President</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dean of the College: All undergraduate students</li> <li>Dean of Graduate School: All graduate students</li> <li>Director of Center for Learning and Teaching: All teaching assistants</li> <li>Dean of Faculty: All faculty</li> <li>Registrar: Any students who have not completed all course evaluations</li> <li>President: All students and faculty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All individuals send one mass email at the start of the evaluation period from the university president</li> <li>After the first week, registrar emails all students who have not filled out all their course evaluations</li> </ul>
University G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Registrar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mass email sent to all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All students receive an email at the start of the evaluation period</li> <li>After the first week, the registrar emails all students who have not filled out all their course evaluations</li> </ul>
University H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mass email sent to all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emails are sent periodically to all students 2-3 times per evaluation period</li> </ul>

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

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#### University H: Alerts on Campus Computers

In addition to mass emails sent out to students, the University H places pop-up alerts on all computing systems on campus. Over the 10-day course evaluation period, students logging into any university computer receive a message prompting them to fill out their course evaluations. The pop-up message contains a link that directs students to the course evaluation website. Contacts at University H note that this is an effective way of reaching students who ignore email reminders from the institution.

*“The computer alerts make it as simple as possible for students to fill out the evaluations. You just have to make it easy and put the link in front of students and they will fill them out.”*

- Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences  
University H

#### Promoting Course Evaluations through Campus-wide Marketing Campaigns

Most institutions engage in campus-wide marketing campaigns to promote online course evaluations to students. Contacts note that marketing campaigns and raffles during the course evaluation period tend to increase participation rates by between five to ten percent, depending on the scope of the campaign. Contacts at **University B** report success using faculty testimonies promoting course evaluations and recommend featuring quotes from faculty members in marketing campaigns.

Marketing campaigns across institutions include:

- Banners advertising the start of the course evaluation period
- Advertisements in student publications
- Flyers in student common areas
- Meetings with and emails to all leaders of student groups
- Faculty testimony about the importance of course evaluations

#### Spotlight: University A’s Charity Incentive

**University A** recently established a system of charity donations to incentivize students to submit course evaluations. Each year, a different donor—either from the community or a university alumnus—contributes one dollar to a local or national charity for every student course evaluation submitted.

Contacts at University A found that the concept of contributing to charity through completing course evaluations has prompted students to take course evaluations more seriously. Contacts said that since the charity system was implemented, students have registered far fewer complaints about filling out their course evaluations. Last year alone the charity program collected over \$50,000.

*“We found that most students will not bother filling out their course evaluations if it means entering a raffle to win an iPod. Make the incentive a positive contribution, and students will view course evaluations positively.”*

- Dean of Undergraduate Research  
University A

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

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#### Conducting Mid-Term Course Evaluations to Improve End-of-Semester Evaluation Response Rates

Contacts at several institutions state that faculty members who conduct mid-term evaluations have considerably higher end-of-semester course evaluation response rates. Mid-term course evaluations are informal evaluations of faculty performance by students and are administered in class by faculty members.

#### Spotlight: Sample Mid-Term Course Evaluations

Contacts at **University J** said that mid-term course evaluations should be kept as informal as possible. The Center for Teaching at University J recommends that faculty write questions on the board and have students submit written responses anonymously. Contacts state that most faculty members prefer shorter mid-term evaluations because they require less class time to administer. The following is a template the Center for Teaching offers online for faculty members interested in conducting brief mid-term course evaluations:

- List the major strengths of this course. What is helping you learn in this course? Please give a brief example.
- List any changes that could be made in the course to assist with your learning. Please suggest how changes could be made.

Approximately 30% of all faculty members at University J conduct mid-term course evaluations and have found them an effective strategy for increasing student response rates for the end of semester course evaluations.

*“This is a very simple, very easy-to-implement way of telling students that their feedback is valuable to them, and it always, always, always improves end of semester course evaluation response rates.”*

- *Director of Assessment  
University J*

### III. INCREASING STUDENT RESPONSE RATES FOR ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

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#### Spotlight: Making Course Evaluations a Portion of Students' Final Grades

Contacts agree that large lecture courses with low individual professor-student contact generally have substantially lower course evaluation response rates than small, discussion-driven courses.

To reverse this trend, several departments at **University A** recommend that faculty members make course evaluations count toward students' final grades. For example, the chemistry department allows faculty members teaching large lecture courses to make course evaluation completion worth one percent of students' final grades. Contacts state that chemistry courses at University A routinely have response rates that exceed 90%.

*"You'd never think that getting a 95% response rate in a large chemistry lecture course was a possibility. Making course evaluations worth a portion of students' grades, even if it's just one percent, it is an incentive that almost all students will accept."*

- *Dean of Undergraduate Research  
University A*

## IV. IMPROVING COURSE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRES

### Differentiating Questionnaires at the Faculty and Department Level

The majority of institutions utilize a single core questionnaire for all undergraduate students across the institution, as multiple evaluative tools produce data that is not comparable across the institution.

Instead of differentiating questionnaires by college or discipline, most institutions supplement a core questionnaire with several additional questions chosen by department administrators and individual faculty members. For the most part, institutions limit the number of additional questions that departments and faculty members may add to ensure that the overall questionnaires maintain a reasonable length. Departments and faculty members submit finalized questions several weeks before the beginning of the course evaluation period.

Contacts across institutions state that allowing departments and individual faculty members to add questions provide the following benefits:

Adding Questions by Department

**Advantages:** Departments have flexibility on a yearly basis for selecting course evaluation questions; student course evaluation responses are then factored into department promotion and tenure decisions.

Adding Questions by Individual Faculty Members

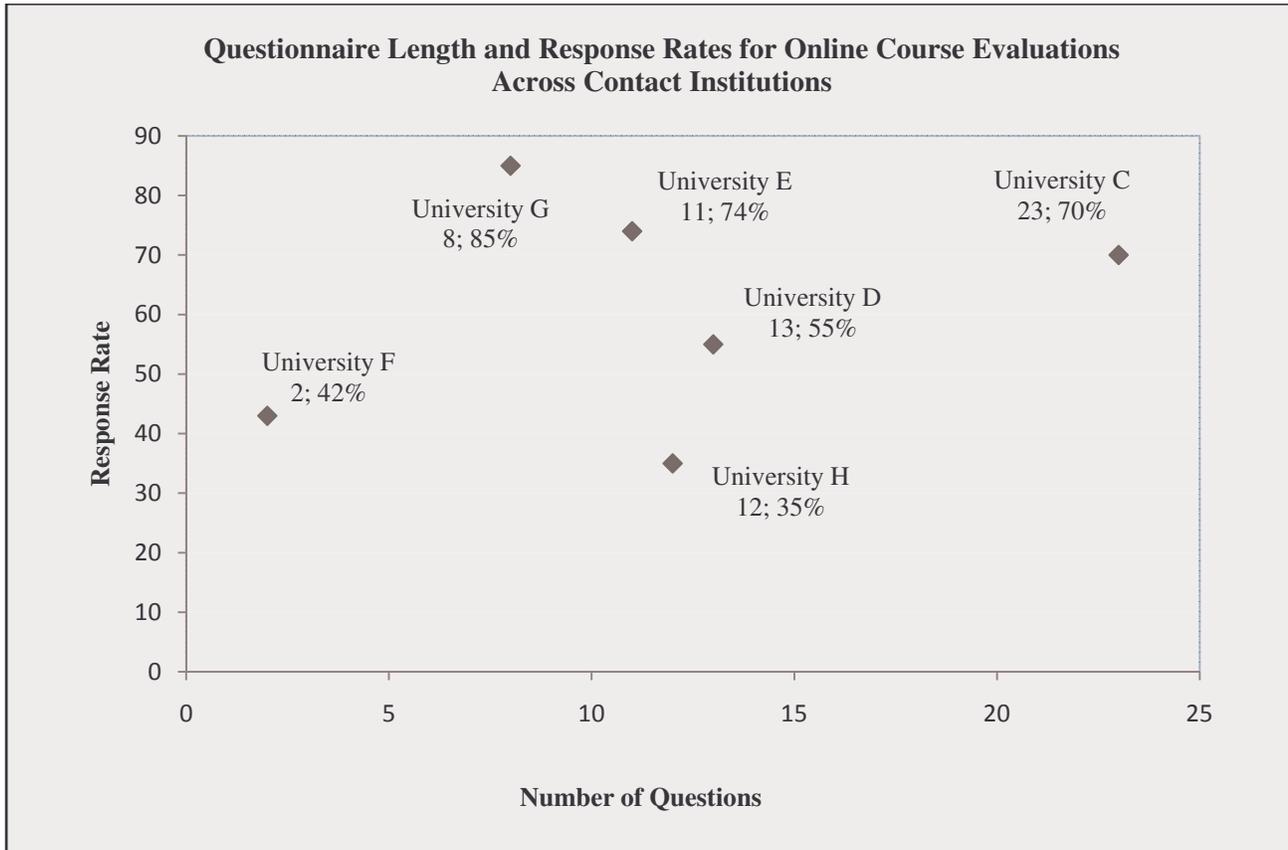
**Advantages:** Faculty members may ask questions relating to student satisfaction of specific coursework. Faculty members can then reference student responses and modify their courses for future semesters.

Institution	Individuals Responsible for Adding Questions	Number of Questions on Base Questionnaire	Maximum Number of Additional Questions	Additional Question Type(s)
University A	Faculty members	N/A	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple choice</li> <li>Open text</li> </ul>
University C	Department administrators	23	Unlimited (recommended up to 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple choice</li> <li>Open text</li> </ul>
University G	Faculty members	8	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open text</li> </ul>
University H	Department administrators	12	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple choice</li> </ul>
University E	Faculty members	12	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple choice</li> <li>Open text</li> </ul>

# IV. IMPROVING COURSE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRES

## Assessing Length of Course Evaluation Questionnaires

Across contact institutions, there is no direct correlation between the number of questions on course evaluation questionnaires and response rates for online course evaluations. Several contacts state that student surveys conducted internally suggest that students are more likely to complete shorter questionnaires.



## IV. IMPROVING COURSE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRES

### Lesson Learned: University F's Two-Question Course Evaluation

Several years ago **University F** developed a course evaluation questionnaire based on internal research and student focus groups. Using a professional team of statisticians, they designed a questionnaire with a total of 25 questions that took students seven to ten minutes to complete.

The first-year response rate for the new survey was 54%. Contacts state that the response rates were lower than the faculty senate anticipated. A committee of faculty members decided—against the counsel of the office of assessment—to radically shorten the questionnaires. The questionnaire was shortened to only include the following two questions:

- 1.) How would you rate this course overall?
- 2.) How would you rate this instructor overall?

The year after the institution adopted the shortened questionnaire student response rates dropped to 44% across the institution. Many faculty members now complain that they are no longer receiving student comments. Additionally, contacts state that academic departments are unable to extract any useful data from the questionnaires and can no longer justify using the data in tenure and promotion considerations.

*“To say it bluntly: Brevity is not the solution. It doesn’t matter if they’re two questions long or twenty questions long—the institution needs to make a commitment to assessment.”*

- *Director of Center for Teaching and  
Excellence  
University F*

## V. USE OF DATA COLLECTED IN COURSE EVALUATIONS FOR PROMOTION AND TENURE DECISIONS

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### Making Course Evaluations a Component of Faculty Teaching Evaluations

All contact institutions—with the exception of **University E**—use course evaluations as a component in faculty teaching evaluations.

At all contact institutions, the manner in which course evaluations are used for tenure and promotion review differs on a departmental basis. For example, at the **University H**, some departments use course evaluations as the only component of faculty teaching evaluations. Conversely, in departments where course evaluations are a minor portion of a faculty member’s teaching evaluation, faculty members are additionally evaluated based on classroom visits by peers, teaching portfolios, and written student testimony. Most departments at **University J** peer classroom visits, teaching statements, and evaluations from other faculty members in faculty teaching evaluations.

#### Spotlight: Instructing Departments on How to Use Course Evaluations

Contacts at **University B** state that online course evaluations provide a wealth of data that can cause confusion among departments. Many faculty members and department chairs were unable to interpret course evaluation data, and as a result, departments were unclear as to how course evaluation data should be factored into tenure and promotion considerations.

In response to this confusion, the Office of Institutional Research at University B recently instituted a series of instructional workshops geared toward faculty members and department administrators for the 2009-2010 academic year. Workshops are administered by institutional research staff and focus on assisting faculty members, department chairs, and deans with interpreting course evaluation data.

*“People need to remember that course evaluations are not the only way teaching should be evaluated. We’re hoping that the workshops will inform departments that course evaluations should be viewed as a component of faculty teaching evaluations.”*

- Associate Provost for Institutional Research and Assessment  
University B

### Summarizing Student Comments for Tenure and Promotion Committees

Several contact institutions note that student comments often provide more valuable feedback about faculty teaching than the information provided on the multiple-choice section of course evaluations. As a result, several institutions use student comments in tenure and promotion considerations. At **University D**, teaching committees from individual departments read and summarize all student comments for the tenure and promotion committee. Each faculty member’s teaching evaluation contains several pages of summarized student comments intended to reflect overall student perception of the faculty member’s teaching. At **University C**, the tenure review committee looks at all student comments in the raw form. Contacts at University C note that though reading all student comments requires a substantial time commitment, the process offers an honest and comprehensive view of a faculty member’s teaching abilities.

Contacts at University C and University D stress that tenure and promotion committees look to student comments for patterns over a period of several years. Though faculty members are rarely dismissed on the basis of poor course evaluations alone, contacts recommend including student comments in faculty teaching evaluations.

### **Professional Services Note**

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