

To: College of Charleston Faculty Senate
From: Faculty Educational Technology Committee
Re: Recommendation on Online Student Evaluation of Classes
Date: 15 March 2006

Recommendation

The FETC recommends that the Senate support the implementation of online student evaluation of classes.

Rationale

We value the intent and purpose of the College's evaluation system.

The current paper-and-pencil delivery mechanism has weaknesses that can be addressed by an online delivery system.

The financial, physical and technical resources are available to implement online evaluations.

An online delivery system can provide additional formative and summative features that will benefit faculty, students and the institution.

Presented by the 2005-2006 FETC members:

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James Neff, Physics
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Purpose of Student Evaluation of Classes

The College has been evaluating courses and instructors under the current system since the early 1990s.

Pedagogically, many faculty members find the student evaluations of classes to be an important source of information for measuring the success of classroom strategies and student satisfaction.

Institutionally, these evaluations are an important part of annual reviews and of the tenure and promotion process.

More recently, one purpose of student evaluation of classes is to meet external requirements placed on the College by the SC Commission on Higher Education (CHE), which mandates that each institution conduct evaluations of all sections of every course every semester (except those with a single student enrolled or those courses coded “independent study”).

Limitations of the paper-and-pencil delivery system

- The current procedure rests on a manual multi-step delivery system for dissemination. By the time the final copies of the evaluations reach the faculty, the original form has transited back and forth between no less than 3 offices on campus (ACTS, AAPA, Departments) and various other intermediaries including faculty, staff, and students. At this point, there are too many gaps in the system and too many places where evaluation forms can be lost, momentarily misplaced, misused, or incorrectly administered. In such conditions, confidentiality and privacy can also both be compromised given how many junctures there are for information failure.
- The process for preparing, delivering and tabulating the paper evaluations is slow, spanning over 15 weeks, prohibiting professors from obtaining results in a timely manner.
- The current process involves a great deal of labor in each of the various offices involved and represents therefore an excessive burden on the College.
- Each semester too many classes remain unevaluated, placing the College in jeopardy of a CHE fine (which could be as high as \$500,000) for non-compliance with the CHE mandate cited above.
- The process is inflexible and changes are expensive (e.g., new print plates).
- Open-ended (comment) questions are hand written and compromise the student’s privacy and anonymity.
- Results are presented in a paper format that is difficult for both faculty and chairs to use.
- If the forms are lost, numerical results can be duplicated, but comments cannot be retrieved.
- Issues such as reprints, “double bubbling,” incorrect forms being distributed, use of old or “doctored” forms, etc., render results invalid and are of no benefit to the professor or the institution.

- In-class evaluations use valuable class time.
- The process is expensive, necessitating the use of up to 70,000 evaluation forms per semester not including paper copies issued later to faculty. Since the current printer is 22 years old and will go out of service in May 2006, the College will have to spend tens of thousands of dollars to replace it, placing an additional financial burden on our institution.

Development of Online Student Evaluation of Classes at the College

In response to faculty expression of interest in transitioning to online delivery of student evaluations, a committee of faculty and administrators was formed in January 2001 to investigate the topic. For the following five years, the committee researched and analyzed existing systems as well as the results those systems generated. This information was considered in terms of the history of student evaluations of classes at the College, local uses of the evaluations and the data they generate, and needs of the main audiences – faculty, staff, and students – involved.

Upon discovering that only a former Faculty Educational Technology Committee, but not the Faculty Senate itself, had expressed support of the online student evaluation system being proposed, the committee suspended its work. At that point, a trial run that had been scheduled for Spring 2006 was postponed. Instead, the committee pursued faculty support for the system. Faculty Senate President Bob Mignone in Fall 2005 charged the FETC with investigating online student evaluation of classes generally, and the particular version of them being prepared at the College, to return in Spring 2006 with its recommendation.

Proposed Online Delivery of Student Evaluation of Classes

The culmination of five years of extensive research and implementation has replicated the current system utilizing an online delivery mechanism with the following characteristics:

- Via Cougar Trail, students will be able to view and evaluate only their own classes.
- Students will be able to evaluate each class only one time.
- Students will not be able to view course evaluation results.
- Students will be able to evaluate classes only during the last two weeks of the semester; this schedule closely corresponds with the current time frame for student evaluation of classes.
- Online evaluation would be available only to those classes consisting of more than two students and those not coded as independent study.

The proposed online student evaluation system addresses several issues elicited from the five-year study and faculty response.

- The Cougar Trail system will ensure anonymity between student and professor, privacy of response, and confidentiality even in open-ended response formats.
- Student participation will be optional, as it is now, but student absence from class will no longer prohibit individual participation.

- Research indicates that response rates will decrease initially. However, research also indicates that rates increase in response to coordinated efforts among student groups and instructors.

Implementation Options

Full Implementation

The Online Evaluation System would be fully implemented and completely replace the current paper-and-pencil system. The system could be operational and accessible through Cougar Trail as early as Fall 2006. The evaluation process would be open only during the last two weeks of classes, mirroring as closely as possible the current evaluation system. Current Cougar Trail hours are 8 am until 12 am Monday through Friday. Hours can be further restricted.

Pilot Project: Partial implementation of Online Evaluation System

A subset of the faculty would use the online student evaluation system during the evaluation process (instead of the paper system), while the rest of the faculty uses the current paper-and-pencil system. This could be implemented as early as the fall semester 2006.

Benefits of Online Evaluation

The first version of the online student evaluation system would be intended to replicate the paper-based evaluation system with no changes in questions or format. Some changes will result directly from the electronic means of delivery. These include the following:

Immediate benefits

For Instructors:

- Student comments are returned immediately after the semester ends for formative use before the next semester starts.
- All student comments are legible even if they remain unintelligible.
- Student comments are typed to better preserve anonymity.
- Results are returned electronically in a form ready for printing.
- Results are returned electronically in a form for analysis and graphing.
- System integrity is increased (encryption of data, no hand-manipulation of forms).
- Faculty will not miss access to student feedback due to student absences.
- Business processes are simplified (do not have to remember to take the evaluations to class).
- Security is increased (faculty do not have to depend on one student to execute the process in class and return the forms on behalf of the instructor).
- Class time is recovered.

For Students:

- Student anonymity will increase because comments will be typed.
- SCIP responses will be available before registration for the next semester.
- A student will not miss an opportunity to complete an evaluation due to a class absence.
- Every student will have access to the evaluation forms for their classes.
- Students will not be able to bubble in more than one response to each question.

For the Institution:

- System integrity is increased (via data security and student anonymity).
- System reliability increases (with simplified business process).
- Data validity is increased (by eliminating opportunities for cheating).

Future Benefits

Once the first version is in place, the faculty could consider adding features to the online system. Examples of features enabled by the online delivery mechanism include the following:

Options to consider for future versions of the online student evaluation system:

- The number of days and the hours per day, during which the evaluations are available, can be adapted to improve the system.
- Comment boxes can have a spell checker to improve anonymity of student comments.
- Each faculty member could add questions to the evaluation specific to a course or section.
- Each department and school could add questions to the evaluation.
- Program assessment questions can be included for learning/accreditation standards.
- Data is stored electronically allowing instructors and administrators to analyze trends over time.
- The system can remind and encourage students to complete their evaluations.
- A report of the response rate can be sent to instructors during the evaluation period to allow instructors to encourage student participation.
- The evaluation system can automatically generate the T&P section on course evaluations at any time.
- Instructors can insert comments into evaluations and evaluation summaries (perhaps explaining how they plan to respond to or improve the course).