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**FAEC Recommendations Regarding Online Student Evaluations**

For the Fall 2011 semester, 155 course sections did their student evaluations online. The response rate across sections was 58%. This is consistent with what the response rate has been for the past several semesters. Response rates have been 52% (Fall 2009), 66% (Spring 2010), 61% (Fall 2010). The highest rates have been in First Year Seminar because some sections are brought to computer labs to complete the evaluations.

As a benchmark, research cited in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2010 indicated that across 300 institutions, the response rate for paper evaluations done in class was 78%, and the rate for online in that study was 53% (Miller, 2010). Also, Benton and Cashin (2011) report that “response rates to open-ended questions posted online tend to be higher (Johnson, 2003) and written comments lengthier (Hardy, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Layne et al., 1999)” (p. 11).

Further, research at Purdue University (Nelson, 2012) found that:

- Fewer students complete online evaluations than paper evaluations across all classes (N > 4000 classes per term). The usual paper response rate was about 70%; the average online response rate was generally less than 58%.
- Interestingly, approximately 70% of students completed at least one class evaluation, but they didn't necessarily do all of them. Nelson attributes this to survey fatigue, and has some data to support this.
- The nature of the responses does not differ between online and paper formats. Both forms of evaluation yield the same median evaluations and comparable mean evaluations if you correct for outliers (which they do at Purdue). Nelson has found no significant shift in extreme evaluations when going to online formats. [In addition, Benton and Cashin (2011) cite five additional studies that have also found no difference in the evaluations when comparing online versus paper, regardless of response rates. For example, in one study the correlations between the online and paper format evaluations when the same students responded under both formats were .84 for the instructor and .86 for the course.]
- Students indicated that they would do the surveys more for incentives (such as being able to view grades early), for credit (such as extra credit in a class), and if the instructor showed that she or he really cared about the evaluations and used them.

Nelson advises:

- Phasing in online student evaluations with a long roll out. They used a 3 semester roll out at Purdue, and he indicates that the longer the better to work out the bugs before full implementation.
- A two week window to complete the evaluations works well; most are done within 2 weeks.
- Response rates are best if done later in the term; the two weeks right before final exams works best.
- Having the students use mobile devices such as their phones works, but they write fewer comments.
- If a faculty member has a large class doing the evaluations online during class time (on mobile devices or laptops), be sure the classroom can handle that many people on wifi at the same time.
- Online courses yield the lowest response rates.
- Use multiple incentives to raise response rates; class incentives work best:
  - some credit on an assignment or extra credit in the class
  - having faculty discuss ways they've used the feedback in the past

Based on the above research, the materials available via the Idea Center (2008), and the circumstances at Ramapo, the FAEC recommends the following:

1. Phase in online student evaluations over the next 4 semesters, with a goal to have all course evaluations online, with a return rate goal of at least 65% by the end of Spring 2014. According to

the Idea Center (2008), a minimum response rate of 65% is desirable to have confidence that the results represent the general experience for students.

2. The last faculty to switch to online should be those who still need their evaluations for online personnel decisions. By the time they move to online, all the possible problems should be solved.
3. Make the evaluations available to students at the end of term for 2-3 weeks, with repeated e-mail reminders every 3 days as is currently done.
4. Give faculty who are concerned with response rate the choice of having students bring their laptops to class for the evaluations, supplemented with Ramapo netbooks as needed. (This will require ITS to have a set of netbooks to loan out.)
5. Use multiple incentives to raise response rates:
  - a. Send targeted messages to incoming transfer and first-year students about the importance of completing student evaluations. This is one way to change the student culture (Idea Center, 2008).
  - b. Ask SGA for help in soliciting high participation in student evaluations; this might include articles in the College newspaper (Idea Center, 2008).
  - c. Faculty could give some credit on an assignment or extra credit in the class to students completing the evaluations, if they so choose.
  - d. Faculty could discuss ways they've used the feedback in the past with their classes, and can ask the students for feedback about specific aspects of the course to increase participation.
6. The Provost's Office should prepare for the staffing needs of doing reports for all faculty and all courses via online reports in a timely manner. Right now Claire Naporano does all the report migrations on her computer; it is not an automatic process.
7. The current report format needs to be improved in three ways:
  - a. Change the default printed font size so that the printouts are more easily read. The reports generally print out in a very small font. It is easy to change the font on the screen if a faculty member is reading them for him or herself on the computer – but the default printout for personnel processes is difficult to read.
  - b. Insert page breaks between different courses for a given faculty member. The reports currently print out with all of a faculty member's classes for a given semester in one report – without a page break between courses. This is also difficult to read for personnel processes; each course report should start on a new page.
  - c. Format the report to separate out individual student comments. The comments that students write on the evaluations sometimes print out all together, in one paragraph. It is not always possible to tell whether many students wrote comments or one student wrote a long comment. This makes the reports less useful, and more difficult to interpret.
8. Adjust the personnel process to accommodate the fact that faculty who use online evaluations will have student comments and those who use paper currently are not permitted to include comments.
9. Adjust access to student evaluations so that unit personnel committees have access to the online reports, just as they have access to the paper files.

## References

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