Improving Completion Rate of Instructor Evaluations

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Abstract

Flashpoint Engineering deems the issue of teacher evaluations to be important, not just because it affects us directly, but also because of its potential to have lasting effects on future generations. The teacher evaluations are supposed to be filled out immediately at the end of each academic semester by students reflecting upon their experience in the class which they have just taken. The intention is that professors will receive feedback necessary for making adjustments in the future, so that their respective courses can be better constructed for future students. Better professors teach more effective classes which produce better professionals. The teacher evaluations are an essential first step in strengthening the value of our degree here at UF.

As a group, reflecting on our own experiences with completing evaluations, we decided that the problem lies within the fact that not enough are completed to represent any consistently occurring opinions which professors can recognize. While many factors cause the low completion rate, we decided to focus on students’ motivations to participate. While the numbers for completion rates have been far from perfect over the past few years, they were at least acceptable during the days of paper forms when students would bubble responses. However, the forms recently switched from being passed around the classroom to being solely accessed online. We also hypothesized that the problem may lie within the fact that students do not believe their responses matter, that what they say has no effect on their professor’s lecture style, and that future students will not benefit from their opinion.

We interviewed professors at the University of Florida to get their opinions and experiences on what has and has not been effective in getting students motivated to fill out evaluation forms. To make sure the feedback came from a variety of instructors with different methods, we took note of those professors with the highest and lowest completion rates before approaching them for interviews. After sitting down and speaking with many of the men and women who teach the future engineers out of the University of Florida, we were pleased to find some correlation in the responses. It was evident that those professors who made extra effort to encourage completion were somewhat more successful than those who did not. Also, the professors who offered time in class for completion saw higher numbers as well. Many did, however, point out that the responsibility does not lie solely with them.

Professors can and have tried different approaches that have worked to promote the participating in the filling out of evaluations. Releasing the forms at the end of the semester, around exam time, is common. Students will always be asked to pause studying for final exams long enough to reflect on the past few months. Some problems, like the one just mentioned, are unavoidable. However, there are other things which can be done to counteract such resistance and the responsibility to make it happen sits on the shoulders of a few separate parties. The administration, our student organizations, and the registrar’s office can all do their parts to generate motivation.
Introduction

The problem of low evaluation rates has been swept under the carpet a countless number of times. It is something that everyone has an opinion on, and yet no one has a solution. So our group decided to tackle this problem head-on for our group project.

The online evaluations are a project that began in January 2007. A beta test was used successfully to collect data for selected courses in two colleges for Spring semester of 2007. The purpose of this evaluation system was to be implemented for evaluation of online courses offered at this University.

In the Fall semester of 2009, the project was given to Provost’s office. Under the wing of the Provost’s office, the project took a giant leap, to be scaled to use for the all credit courses. After much planning and many approvals later, three to four colleges would be selected to participate in the pilot run. Afterwards, data was collected and since it was feasible and acceptable, it was followed by an addition of another four colleges. After these additional four colleges, the rest of the colleges were placed into the system, making it university-wide.

The Implementation Plan is an outline of how to execute this project and listed potential problems and set backs. One of the major problem was the return rates. Without incentives, whether positive or negative, there could be a major drop in return rates, in the transition from paper evaluations to online evaluations. Research will be done by the Provost’s office to study the rate of return difference from in class forms and online evaluations.

There are currently a few options under consideration: educating students on the importance of evaluations, an initial letter of encouragement from the Provost, constant email reminders to those that have yet to complete their evaluations, restricting access to faculty evaluation results to those who have not completed their evaluations and perhaps even delaying grade release on ISIS till have evaluations are complete. Currently, we are only using education of students of importance of evaluations, emailing reminders, and encouragement from faculty. There was funding from Student Technology Fee to design and develop a mobile interface for University of Florida Student Evaluation application which was released at the Fall of 2011, which was predicted to greatly help increase rates, since the accessibility is increased to meet current generation’s needs. Another problem addressed in the Implementation Plan was the question set. The questions were tested for the consistency and relevance in the Irani and Telg study in 2003, with positive results. So in order for any of the basic set of questions to change, it would require the Board of Governor, Collective Bargaining and Faculty Senate notice and agreement. Another issue is access control. The control varies with different college and department levels. Even within the college and department, there are further distinctions for administrations and readers.

Although this plan provided input into the problem and different solutions, we wanted more input from Professors and Students. Using this information, we hope to come up with more solutions that satisfy both our Student Body and Professors, alike.
Experimental Methods

Our group employed a variety of methods for a variety of tasks. Initially, we had to find what the real problem was. The very first step was to examine the current state responsible for the problem and to decide on a desired state. The current state is that, since the switch from paper evaluations to exclusively electronic instructor evaluations in Fall 2011, completion rates have dropped significantly within the College of Engineering. The desired state is to raise the completion rates to, at the very least, match the completion rates reported when paper evaluations were used. Ideally, we want to find a solution that achieves 100 percent completion, not only for the College of Engineering, but for all of the University of Florida. In order to more specifically target the problem, we used KT analysis, which is shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT</th>
<th>IS</th>
<th>IS NOT</th>
<th>DISTINCTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low student participation rates for faculty evaluations.</td>
<td>An inability for students to fill out evaluations.</td>
<td>Students have resources available but do not utilize them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHERE</td>
<td>Online evaluations.</td>
<td>Paper evaluations.</td>
<td>One is completed in class, the other is completed outside of class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHEN</td>
<td>Near finals.</td>
<td>Any other time of the semester.</td>
<td>Different amounts of work load and knowledge of professors for students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXTENT</td>
<td>A fraction of the student population.</td>
<td>A reasonable amount of the student population.</td>
<td>Less of the student population is filling out evaluations than would be expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXTENT</td>
<td>Certain professors.</td>
<td>Most professors.</td>
<td>Professors have different evaluation rates.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After determining that the problem was lower evaluation completion rates, we set out to find solutions. Early efforts included vertical and lateral thinking. Additionally, we generated a Duncker diagram, which was used to see if there was any way that we could change the current system in order to make it acceptable to not increase the completion rate. The ideas presented on the right side of the diagram represent only a sample of ideas for how to accomplish this. Our Duncker diagram is shown below, with the most feasible option being to make the evaluations optional. This is the current system.
After considering these results, we felt that our best resource for seeking ideas for improvement was the instructors and evaluation administrators. A common trend among peer groups was to issue student questionnaires regarding their project. For example, a group working to improve recycling on campus might issue a survey asking for input about a person’s recycling habits, awareness, etc. We decided against a student survey because we felt our group represented the entire spectrum of opinions regarding instructor evaluations. Of our group of six, some always completed evaluations, some never completed evaluations, and some completed the evaluations intermittently.

In order to select the professors who would be interviewed, we collected data regarding completion rates for specific professors within the Department of Chemical Engineering. We ranked instructors based on completion percentage and targeted specific groups for interviews. Based on an average completion rate of 54 percent, we selected three professors with “high” completion rates, five professors with “average” completion rates, and one professor with a “low” completion rate. The table at the end of this section shows the ranking and selection of professors based on completion percentage. Selected professors are indicated by a “Y” in the “Interviewed? (Y/N)” column and grey row highlighting. In addition to the five selected from the table, two others were selected from other departments within the College of Engineering.

We also felt it would be beneficial to speak with an evaluations administrator. We interviewed Dr. Angela Lindner, the Associate Dean for Student Affairs in the College of Engineering, as well as a chemical engineering department head.

We realized that, with the resources available, we were fairly limited in the number of interviews that could be conducted. If we were to return to this study, we would speak with more instructors outside of the College of Engineering, as we want to find a robust solution that is suitable for the entire university. Our results may be biased toward engineering students and their unique demands. Engineering
students represent a comparatively small fraction of UF’s overall student population.

The results and ideas gathered from these interviewed are covered fully in the Results section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professor Rank</th>
<th>Completion Percentage</th>
<th>Interviewed? (Y/N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

The results of our instructor interviews are presented here in table format. The interviews are sorted by the team member who conducted each interview. Included is the number of interviews conducted by each team member, and the input of the interviewee. The interviewees are sorted into three groups: high, mid, and low. The “high” group includes two professors whose completion rates are considerably above average. The “mid” group includes four professors whose completion rates are average or near average. The “low” group includes one professor who completion rate is considerably below average. The group is indicated parenthetically after the interview number.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Member</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Input</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandon Crooks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interview 1 (N/A. Associate Dean)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Has tried making completion rate between the departments a competition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sends multiple emails at the end of the semester reminding students of the evaluations’ importance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assembled a committee to spend an extended period of time sitting on the idea so that a thoughtful conclusion can be reached.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview 2 (N/A. Dept. Head)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• When he taught, he allowed for the usage of class time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Only considered higher percentage completion rates when making tenure decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Thinks a day, possibly a quiz day, should be set where students bring laptops and/or smart phones to complete evaluations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie Simmons</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interview 1 (mid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Stresses that it is mostly the students’ responsibility to complete evaluations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reminds that ultimately they will affect the student and generations of students to come.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mars Stryker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interview 1 (mid):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reminds students verbally in class and emphasizes evaluations as the students’ way to improve the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Suggests mid-semester evaluation for improving the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Results are biased when extra credit is given.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview 2 (low):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reminds students verbally, but does not consider student feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Suggests requiring justification for extreme ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny Kwong</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview 1 (high):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Add link to E-Learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Send constant and consistent email reminders.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discuss the importance of evaluations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ask about students’ lives, and show that you care, even though it seems like its nothing, actually very valuable to students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Takes suggestions from students and looks for trends in qualitative responses.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses evaluations to improve class and teaching/learning environment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supports the use of mid-semester evaluations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview 2 (mid):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Much rather go back to paper system, loss of completion rate not worth switch.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prefer evaluations at end of course.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discusses with students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does take suggestions and comments from qualitative response.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mid-semester evaluations seem like a good idea, but may be too overwhelming on students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Best idea is to fill out evaluations in class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrence Ho</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview 1 (mid):</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Suggests reserving time to do evaluations in class, special on quiz day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Suggests using smart phone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourages students to fill it out.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prefers electronic evaluation since it is much easier to process the results.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No bonus or penalty in order to increase the evaluation rate because it will bias the results.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Suggests encouragement from student organization.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use mid term evaluation to improve performance in a particular class during semester.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview 2 (high):</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Explain the reasons in class and remind student through email.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prefer paper form instead of electronic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recommends reminder from advisor at the end of every semester.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Puts suggested questions from students on the evaluation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No bonus or penalty in order to increase the evaluation rate.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following our interviews, we identified four key areas for improvement: students, professors, administration, and system. We organized ideas in each of these areas using a fishbone diagram, which is shown below.

**System**
- Smart phone app
- Mobile site
- Pop-up screen combined with e-learning

**Administration**
- Competition between departments
- **Hold on ISIS prior to completion**
- Advisor can remind students

**Professors**
- Reminder in class or through email
- **Explain importance**
- Complete during class

**Students**
- Take responsibility
- **Organizational reminder** (AIChE, NSBE, etc.)

Increase completion rate
Discussion

Based on the information summarized in the fishbone diagram, we propose a set of recommendations to increase the benefits of all involved with the Faculty Evaluation system. We have selected one item from each of the four key areas, with the exception of system improvements. All of these ideas merit inclusion, and we feel they are simple enough to be implemented.

- **Professors:** Teachers should remind students about evaluations in class and are encouraged to send email reminders. As part of these reminders, they should explain the significance of student feedback with regard to class structure, teaching methods, and tenure and raises of professors.
- **Students:** Student organizations (AIChE, for example) must become active in promoting completion of evaluations by reminding organization members.
- **Administration:** The University can institute an academic hold, possibly delaying release of final grades for lack of completed evaluations. The form of this hold is the discretion of administration.
- **System:** A mobile app should be developed for instructor evaluations. Additional considerations include linking the evaluations to the university’s e-learning site and placing a pop-up reminder each time a user logs into the e-learning site.

In suggesting these particular recommendations, we believe that the strongest improvement overall will come from a compromise between all parties involved. Drastic changes from one of the parties while the others stay as is will not yield the results that all parties want.
Conclusion

Ideally, the measures we propose would yield 100 percent completion of instructor evaluations. However, this is realistically unlikely. The evaluations will probably never be fully mandatory. To make them compulsory (students cannot register for classes without completing evaluations, for example) would seem to be the easiest fix, but in doing so, many students who do not currently complete evaluations or who are resentful toward the present system are likely to submit unhelpful or nonsense feedback, thus defeating the purpose of an evaluation. A perfect completion rate means nothing if it does not yield any constructive data.

Incentive is proven to increase completion rates, but a bonus system is unlikely to function on the university scale. Some instructors reward students who complete evaluations with food. The cost of implementing such a practice across the university makes it prohibitive. Additionally, there is potential for this to take up absorbent amounts of class time. Extra credit is also not a likely alternative. Although some teachers do offer a small bonus toward final grades for completing evaluations, administration openly discourages, and even forbids, this practice as it biases results.

Providing time in class, although an attractive option, is becoming less realistic. Instructors are increasingly pressed for time to complete course material, and using class time for completing evaluations can be a huge loss. Additionally, providing a short time during class encourages students to causally rush through the evaluation.

While it is unfortunate that students simply are not taking their responsibility to report back to the university regarding the quality of their education, this is nonetheless the case. Ideally, students would realize the weight of their opinions and be self-motivated in evaluating courses and instructors. This is the optimal solution, as it is the simplest and most effective solution to the problem. The tenets of our proposal are based largely on this idea. We intend to direct students toward this kind of thinking.

We chose ideas that make completing evaluations easier (system changes), introduce a soft penalty for not completing evaluations (administration changes), and, above all, seek to improve the students' understanding of the importance of the evaluations (student and professor changes).

The ultimate goal is to empower this university by improving communication between student and instructor. When students are forming carefully considered opinions and respectfully reporting them in masses, the instructors will improve, the students will improve, and the quality of education at the University of Florida will improve. Once students realize their potential to influence, measures such as programs, punishments, and incentives will no longer be necessary. The most powerful incentive is to know that your opinion makes a difference. That is the most valuable extra credit of all.
References


