

University Senate Position on Online Instructor Evaluations

(approved by . XX/XX/XXXX)

Document Objectives

There has been recent interest in transitioning instructor evaluations to an online platform. Dr. McConathy has specifically requested input and position from the University Senate. This document conveys the position of the Senate, addressing perspectives on the topics of:

- Potential benefits of such a change
- Points of concern associated with such a change
- Recommendations for the optimization of an online system

Potential Benefits

There is reason to expect benefit from an online faculty-evaluation system and process. Some of these expected benefits include:

- Increase in-class time available for instruction
- Increase feelings of anonymity on the part of respondents
- Increase the ease of administration by removing data-entry, materials-distribution, collection, and process-explanation responsibilities that currently rest on both staff and faculty
- Increase the security and consistency of the system by eliminating the involvement of students to administer, collect, and submit evaluations
- Increase the feeling in students that they may generate and submit comments at their leisure rather than on command
- Increase student access to evaluation submission through online availability
- Increase speed of processing for submitted evaluations and availability to faculty / staff and administrators

Points of Concern

Given the potential benefits of an online evaluation system, there is reason for its consideration. There are potential points of concern that should be addressed when/if the process moves forward. There are two potential modes of participation from the students. The first is completion on a voluntary basis. The second is completion as part of a mandatory course/university requirement.

If participation of students is voluntary, points of concern include:

- Decrease in participation rates as a result of requiring students to complete an additional activity out of class to evaluate instructors
- Shifts in evaluations towards the extremes of rating distributions as a function of the relationship between extremity of opinion (positive or negative) and motivation to complete the task
- Submitted evaluations of faculty / staff shifting to rating extremes (highly positive and highly negative) as participation becomes voluntary and conducted beyond the confines of class time

- Shifts in completion rates, trusting that the process is optional, and provided ratings as a result of idiosyncratic incentives provided by individual instructors

If participation is required of students through a university or course requirement (through, for example, a requirement that evaluations be accessed/submitted prior to grades being released), concerns include:

- Ethics concerns regarding the requirement of students to complete and submit an evaluation.
- Distorted evaluation results as a result of careless and/or indignant use of the system when being forced to complete evaluations

General concerns regardless of the required/optional student involvement include:

- Lack of trust on the part of students of the anonymity of the evaluation system
- Lack of belief on the part of students that ratings given will not affect class grades resulting, e.g., from a lack of trust that the results of the evaluation process are not shared with instructors prior to the submission of final grades
- Concern on the part of instructors that their evaluations - particularly open-ended responses - are held as confidential among their colleagues
- Technical issues resulting in lost evaluation data
- Damage to instructor outcomes (e.g., raises, tenure, promotion) resulting from system-instigated skewing of evaluation data

Senate Recommendations

Taking into account the information presented above, the University Senate recommends that the University does pursue online course evaluations with the following considerations:

- Accessing the evaluation is mandatory for all students; this obligation will be fulfilled after a student accesses the evaluation regardless of whether the student fills out the evaluation or indicates a preference not to
- An automated system be put into place that removes the burden from faculty and staff in sending and following up about whether evaluations have been accessed
 - This would preempt any concern that there may be a conflict of interest in faculty including early access to responses before grades are due
 - Students grades could be temporarily blocked on BOSS for a pre-determined amount of time past the given evaluation due date in an effort to prompt them to access the evaluation. It is our understanding that a similar system like this is currently utilized at ULM and the system they have in place could be used as a starting point.
 - The reasoning for the recommendation of temporarily blocking grades and not doing so indefinitely is that after a certain period of time, students may become frustrated or angry over not being able to access their grades and may take that out on the faculty member in the evaluation especially if there is an assumption that the grade block is the faculty member's fault
 - Alternatively, a registration hold could be applied for the following term. The hold would be released automatically when the student accesses the survey.

- This would remove a large burden and time commitment of the current method from both faculty and staff with relatively little oversight required

System Recommendations

To optimize the online-evaluation system in acknowledgment of the concerns and recommendations listed above, we offer the following recommendations regarding particular approaches to the design of the new survey system:

- *Establish formal expectations on a university level that students will complete surveys each quarter for each course as part of their enrollment*
- *Establish formal university policy on survey design, survey administration, data collection, privacy handling, and availability for use in tenure & promotion activities or other specific uses as directed by the policy.*
 - *This policy should identify which parties are responsible/accountable for and consulted/informed about the development, revision, and execution of the system.*
 - *Policies 2108 and 2221 should be reviewed and revised as necessary in concord with the above revisions/recommendations*
- *Establish a university catalog statement that notes this requirement and generates appropriate expectations as to how the new surveys will be administered*
 - *The issue of grade release as a function of accessing the system should be articulated here (Or registration hold, if that enforcement measure is used)*
 - *Care should be taken to ensure that the system does not permit specific student responses within the system to influence or appear to influence student grades beyond the withholding of grade reports (or application of registration hold)*
 - *Individual faculty should be discouraged from implementing idiosyncratic methods of increasing participation rates*