



Progress Review of the University-Wide Course Evaluation System

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Introduction

This report describes the status of the University-wide, online course evaluation project at the University of Maryland. Coordinated by the Offices of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment and Information Technology, the universal instrument has entered its second phase of testing. Our primary focus at this point in time is the functionality and usability of the new technology developed to administer evaluations. A total of 350 six-week summer session courses participated in the 2007 Summer Session I pilot of the instrument. Several technical problems were uncovered as a part of this process; along with the students' lack of familiarity with the project and no official incentives for participation, these technical glitches appear to have significantly reduced the evaluation return rate. Strategies for improving the response rate in the future, plans for further testing of the instrument, and implementation approaches are presented below.

Project Background

- At the request of students, the University Senate established a Task Force on Course and Teaching Evaluation in 2005 to investigate the implementation of an online, campus-wide course evaluation system which would allow students to view select evaluation results.
- The recommendations of the Task Force and plans for the online system were presented to the University Senate in April, 2006 by an implementation committee. It was determined that each course evaluation would contain a set of universal questions, and could be supplemented by questions from colleges, departments, and/or individual instructors. Students who participated in their course evaluations would be able to view the aggregate results to a sub-set of universal items online.
- Coordinating the project, the Offices of Information Technology (OIT) and Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment (IRPA) first explored the capabilities of the University's course management system (Blackboard) to determine if it could support the campus-wide evaluations. After establishing that Blackboard was not able to meet the University's needs, OIT conducted a thorough evaluation of existing off-the-shelf commercial solutions along with open-source solutions to determine what would be available that would fit our functional requirements and could be deployed in the timeframe desired. It was determined that an existing open-source project would be the best solution. OIT began the open-source development of a new system during the 2006-2007 academic year with direction from IRPA.
- In Fall 2006, IRPA also established the University Course Evaluation Advisory Committee, an ongoing committee with representatives from the colleges (appointed by the Deans) and the original implementation committee. This committee will periodically review the plans for the course evaluation system and its results, and comment on the decisions that will have to be made as the system is developed. (A list of members is attached).

Piloting the Instrument

In the fall of 2006, IRPA began piloting the University-wide course evaluation items approved by the University Senate. Our goal for this first stage of the pilot was to get a better understanding of how the questions themselves were functioning. Select colleges and departments that already utilized online course evaluations through another software program (Web-CT) were approached to participate in the pilot study of the University-wide items. A college with a wide variety (e.g., lecture, studio) of undergraduate and graduate courses (ARCH), a college of graduate-only programs (CLIS), and two undergraduate programs (WMST and HONR) agreed to participate.

During this phase of the pilot, the standard items were included on online forms and administered to students enrolled in ARCH and CLIS courses via Web-CT (WMST and HONR utilized paper forms containing the universal items). The return rates were 64.0% and 71.8% for ARCH and CLIS, respectively; overall, 1486 of the 2213 students receiving an online course evaluation through Web-CT completed the form for a 67.1% response rate. It is our opinion that the online response rate for the fall pilot was largely a function of the administration mode (Web-CT); students were able to complete their evaluations within a system they were familiar with and comfortable using.

Students participating in the Fall 2006 pilot were asked to comment specifically on items which seemed unclear, were hard to answer, or did not seem to apply to them. IRPA examined the psychometric properties (i.e., instrument reliability and validity) of the universal set of items at this time as well. Several minor changes to the original item wording were made based on the results from the fall pilot and the advisory committee's feedback.

Although IRPA originally hoped to start testing the new system during the spring semester of 2007, the product was not ready to pilot with students. Instead, staff members in OIT and IRPA conducted a number of smaller tests utilizing various components of the system as they were developed. As a result of these investigations, we were able to catch and repair several problems before we prepared to test the system with students.

In the second stage of our pilot (Summer 2007), we used the new online technology for the first time to administer the revised questionnaires to UM students. With assistance from the Office of Extended Studies, a set of six-week Summer Session I sections were approached by IRPA to participate in the 2007 Summer Session I pilot. Summer courses running an alternative number of weeks (e.g., four weeks) were excluded from this pilot as we wished to administer the evaluations at the same time to all participants over the last week of class. Courses with fewer than five registered students were also excluded for confidentiality reasons.

The goals of the summer pilot were to investigate the effectiveness of the new technology system developed to administer the online course evaluations, and to determine the stability of our original findings across this new mode of administration once the quantitative data are available. Although the system itself is still in a developmental stage, many of its main components are being tested during the 2007 Summer Session pilot. Students involved in this stage of our pilot have been asked to describe any problems they may have encountered accessing, completing, and/or submitting their online course evaluations.

A total of 350 course sections across eight colleges (ARHU, BMGT, BSOS, CLFS, CMPS, EDUC, HLHP, and UGST) met the necessary requirements and agreed to participate in the Summer Session I pilot. After discussing the project in detail with each of the college representatives, IRPA notified the instructors of these courses about the pilot via email on July 2nd, 2007. We planned to send an email announcing the

availability of online course evaluations to all students enrolled in these courses on July 4th, 2007. We also intended to send an email to students on July 10th reminding them to complete their evaluation(s) if they had not yet done so. The administration period lasted approximately one week, and evaluations closed on July 13th. A total of 2378 out of a possible 5841 evaluations were completed for a 40.7% return rate. At least one evaluation was submitted for 320 of the 350 sections included in the pilot.

Factors Affecting the Return Rate

The relatively modest response rate (40.7%) was anticipated for this stage of the pilot. Based on feedback from students participating in the pilot, IRPA believes the majority of issues affecting the return rate can be classified into the following categories: Email glitches, technology outages, difficulties logging into the system, lack of familiarity with the project, and no official incentives for participation.

Email Glitches

Email announcements failed to reach all students/courses selected for participation in the pilot; thus, students who had not been notified about the pending evaluation did not know to log into the system to complete it. For those students receiving an email, the system sent not one, but five announcements. The flood of emails confused and/or frustrated a number of students. Also, students may have believed the multiple announcements to be “spam.”

The reminder email was sent to all students regardless of whether or not they had already completed the evaluation. Students who had already completed the evaluation were frustrated by the additional email or concerned their responses had not been saved. Students who had not received the initial announcement were confused by the “reminder,” since it was the first time they heard about the project; by this time, these students only had two days to complete their evaluation(s) before they closed, instead of a full week as was intended.

Technology Outages

At several points during the administration period (July 4th-13th), all students attempting to complete their evaluations were unable to log into the system.

- A “bug” in the provider code prevented students from accessing the system the first day the evaluations opened (Wednesday, July 4th). This issue was resolved by 10:00 am on Wednesday, and according to the logs, it looks as though it may have affected as few as 30 respondents.
- A database problem throughout the majority of Sunday, July 8th prevented students from logging into the system. This problem was corrected by 4:00 pm on Sunday.
- A thunderstorm that rolled through College Park at about noon on Tuesday, July 10th affected the connectivity between the developer’s machine and the server. This affected the processing of the reminder emails being sent out on the 10th which required the developer to restart the job once connectivity was restored about an hour later. This did not affect connectivity to the system for students.

Difficulties Logging into the System

Some students did not know how to log into the system with their directory ID and password. Many visiting students indicated they had never used their directory ID before; some students confused their UID with their directory ID, while other students forgot the password associated with their directory ID.

Lack of Familiarity with the Project

Some students indicated they did not know course evaluations would be offered online this session; these students were not checking their official University email account regularly and did not open the emails at all or until after the evaluations closed.

Students are largely unaware of the University-wide, online course evaluation initiative and its goals; students do not know how the project will directly benefit them (i.e., access to evaluation results to help guide their course selections).

There are a number of visiting students enrolled in summer courses; these students are less familiar with University operations and procedures in general, and have less of an investment in the course evaluation process at UM.

No Official Incentives for Participation

Students will not be able to view the evaluation results during testing phases of the instrument. Also, students were informed that their evaluations were part of a pilot test, which may have made them less likely to participate.

Project Plans for Summer and Fall 2007

IRPA and OIT hope to conduct a small technological pilot of the course evaluation system during 2007 Summer Session II. Again, the system will still be in a developmental stage. We hope to catch and repair any remaining glitches in the existing components so we can improve the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators using online course evaluations. During the summer of 2007, we will also be preparing ad hoc reports of evaluation results for the colleges, departments, and/or instructors participating in the summer pilot(s). As soon as the necessary components are completed by the developers, the system itself will carry out the data analysis and reporting aspects of course evaluation.

In Fall 2007, IRPA and OIT intend to conduct a third pilot utilizing the fully-built technology system. Decisions related to the administration of the Fall 2007 pilot (e.g., timeline, scale, participants) depend on the success of the Summer Session II pilot and the completed development of the hierarchical module by the programmers at one of our partnering institutions. We have several important goals for this stage of our testing. Our primary objective for the Fall 2007 pilot is to assess the functionality and usability of the complete system by administering the universal questions across the University. At the same time we also hope to pilot the hierarchical component of the system in a few colleges by allowing colleges, departments, and/or instructors to add their own questions to the evaluation templates. The experiences of those participating in this phase of the pilot will help determine necessary alterations and improvements to this module of the technology system. Finally, we plan to examine the stability of evaluation results across multiple administrations of the instrument.

OIT and IRPA are prepared to closely monitor and address the response rate to help reduce the potential for non-response bias and ensure the evaluation results are representative. We will work to publicize the project to various constituencies across the campus (including students, faculty, and administrators) so that

they can better understand the goals of this University-wide course evaluation initiative and how the project will affect them directly. It is our belief that once the project is well-known to participants, and the majority of technical issues have been eliminated, the response rate will improve significantly. IRPA is crafting its public communication plan and designing training sessions to build awareness of the course evaluation initiative and familiarize users with the new technology system. These campus roll-out plans for Fall 2007 will be shared with the administration as soon as they are available.

As previously mentioned, IRPA is coordinating an advisory committee which will periodically review the plans for the course evaluation system and its results, and comment on the decisions that will have to be made as the system is developed. Feedback from those participating in the pilot(s) will be discussed at an upcoming meeting of the committee, along with the quantitative results. Potential changes to the instrument, system, and/or process will be reviewed at that time.

Once any glitches in the system have been caught and repaired, and the usability of the system is deemed adequate, the standardized course evaluation system can be applied campus-wide. We suggest that the University-wide course evaluations are continually reviewed beyond the system's full implementation. Such reviews could include random sampling to determine the generalizability of findings and investigations linking evaluation results to other measures of teaching effectiveness to further explore the validity of results.