



# A Fresh Look at Response Rates: 9 Best Practices for Colleges and Universities Moving to Online Course Evaluations

**M**any colleges and universities want to reduce paper, both to be more “green” and to save costs.

Moving to online course evaluations and surveys is an obvious way to help meet these goals.

But some post-secondary administrators worry that online evaluations will generate a lower response rate, eroding the worth of the exercise, and limiting the value these deliver to their institutions.

This white paper proposes some new perspectives on response rates: that online evaluations deliver better quality information and reduce the time to action, and that response rates naturally build over time.

Then it presents nine best practices you can implement at your college or university to help build response rates, as follows:

1. Communicate the benefits.
2. Promise absolute confidentiality.
3. Use student portals to encourage, remind, or compel students.
4. Provide a small incentive.
5. Select a system that’s easy to use.
6. Select a system that can scale up for your entire student population.
7. Be sensitive to cultural factors.
8. If necessary, move online in stages.
9. Act quickly to correct issues.

This paper concludes by listing the key **operational** and **strategic** benefits that can result from moving to online, both for your institution and for your department.

## Online evaluations gather better-quality data

**While a great quantity of data is collected by in-class evaluations, the quality of this data is open to question.**

In-class evaluations on paper typically achieve a response rate of 70 percent or higher. <sup>1</sup> A lot of data is certainly collected during in-class evaluations.

But many factors can affect the quality of an in-class evaluation. These include peer pressure, low trust in confidentiality, lack of faculty support, time limits, and classroom rewards or conflicts.

As well, the views of any students absent from class the day of the evaluations are not included. Some students just mark the same answer to every question, and leave the “Comments” section blank. And an unscrupulous faculty member could even alter paper forms before submitting them.

On the other hand, online evaluations done outside the classroom offer much greater privacy and convenience. Students can fill in online forms whenever and wherever they wish. Research shows that students are more likely to provide longer, richer comments on online forms.

But without a professor to prod students on, online evaluations can tend to deliver slightly lower response rates than in-class evaluations.

For example, one study involved 2,453 students from 66 classes in a university in the southeast. The in-class group provided 60.6 percent response, while the online

---

1: Hmicleski & Champagne, “Plugging in to Course Evaluation,” *The Technology Source*, September/October 2000, p. 2

group—after one reminder—provided 47.8 percent. <sup>2</sup>

The tradeoff is that the quality of data gathered may be more thoughtful and more insightful. The real question is: Would you rather gather lots of data of questionable quality, or somewhat less data of higher quality?

## Online evaluations deliver quicker reports and faster action

**Online evaluations deliver much faster reports, along with the potential for quick corrective action.**

Students want to know that their views matter, and that any issues they raise will be corrected quickly. Otherwise, what's the point of answering so many questions? They may well graduate before anything is done about their concerns.

But paper evaluations routinely take two months to deliver reports, and sometimes longer. <sup>3</sup> With evaluations done the final class of the winter term, this means no results are seen until halfway through the spring term. With evaluations done the last class of the spring term, no reports will be available until mid-summer.

And moving from initial reports to concrete action can take months in an academic setting.

At this pace, it's hard to claim that your college is listening carefully to your students' concerns. What's the point of collecting a vast number of responses if any follow-up discussion—let alone action—is so slow to happen?

---

2: Layne, DeCristoforo, & McGinty, “Electronic versus Traditional Student Ratings of Instruction,” *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1999, pp. 224, 226

3: Hmicleski & Champagne, p. 1

On the other hand, online systems can deliver detailed reports within hours of the evaluation cycle ending. Some can even produce on-the-fly results throughout the process.

So although response rates from online evaluations may be lower, results will be delivered faster. This gives more time to discuss and act on any findings, and to reassure students that their voices are indeed being heard.

**Online evaluations build better response rates over time**

**Each round of online evaluations tends to get a higher response, so any investment in the approach pays ongoing dividends.**

The key factors that help drive response rates are shown in Figure 1. To build response rates, colleges and universities

Key Factor
Communication
Trust
Confidentiality
Incentive
Ease of use (no learning curve)
Scalability (no lag time)
Computer literacy
IT readiness (network, e-mail, student portal)
Sensitivity
Action on issues raised

**Figure 1: 10 Key Factors Driving Response Rates to Online Evaluations**

must implement online evaluations in a way that accommodates these factors.

The first year, there may be a noticeable dip in response rates, as both faculty and students get used to the new process. But in each following year, the rate will likely increase... especially if you use the best practices outlined in this white paper.

**Best practices for building response rates**

The rest of this paper presents nine best practices that colleges and universities can use to help build better response rates.

These best practices are based on the hands-on experience of eXplorance with more than 50 colleges and universities that have moved to online course evaluations and surveys in recent years.

**Best practice #1: Communicate the benefits**

Advanced communications can play a huge role in the success of any transition from paper to online evaluations.

Before the move to online takes place, communicate the many advantages this will deliver: saving trees, saving time, faster results, and faster action on student comments.

Always make sure to stress that all answers remain completely confidential.

Repeat these messages often, in mediums that reach students, such as:

- ◆ Creating press releases and ads for campus newspapers
- ◆ Making public service announcements for campus radio stations
- ◆ Putting up posters
- ◆ Sending e-mail campaigns
- ◆ Running banner ads on student portals.

## How “intelligent confidentiality” can help build response rates

Any properly designed system will block anyone from seeing which evaluations came from which student; not even a top system administrator or dean can get past its security measures.

Yet the evaluation database does hold personally identifiable information linked to each student ID.

And there are some cases where a well-designed system can use this data to save time, add convenience, and build response rates. This emerging feature-set is called “intelligent confidentiality” and it’s already implemented in systems like Blue from eXplorance.

Here are three cases where this innovative functionality can help build response rates, without any risk to confidentiality.

### Length of forms

When a student logs in, the system already knows their gender, age, country of origin, major, instructor, and course being evaluated. And it can link to these values in the background without anyone else seeing them.

With no need to ask for these mundane facts, questionnaires can be shorter, which improves response rates.

### Interruptions

Suppose a student is interrupted while doing an evaluation. A system with no intelligent confidentiality will purge any unfinished form. But a system like Blue saves any partial answers, so the next time that student logs in, they can resume from where they left off.

This is less likely to frustrate students, and more likely to build better response.

### Reminders

Research shows that reminders play a big role in building response rates. And the more personalized an e-mail is, the more effective.

Systems like Blue can send an e-mail to any delinquent student to remind them to complete the evaluations they haven’t yet done.

To sum up, intelligent confidentiality can support shorter forms, more graceful interruptions, and personalized reminders... all factors that help build response rates without any risk to confidentiality.

**Hint:** Remember to budget for communications, especially the first year you do online evaluations. You can find this money in your savings on paper.

Speaking of money, one recent study found that online evaluations cost only half as much as in-class paper evaluations, at 47 cents per processed online form versus \$10.6 per process paper form.<sup>4</sup>

The effort and money you put into communications will have a direct impact on the response rate to your first round of online evaluations.

## Best practice #2: Promise absolute confidentiality

Everyone filling in a survey has an unspoken question in their minds, namely, “What’s going to happen to my answers?”

In a college or university setting, all the data gathered through online evaluations and surveys must remain absolutely confidential. **No matter what, not a single faculty member must ever be able to identify what a single student said about their course.**

You must explicitly promise this to your respondents. And this promise should be backed up by technologies that you are prepared to discuss in appropriate forums (*see sidebar on intelligent confidentiality*).

Student reps likely sit on the committees that will consider your proposal to move to online evaluations. Prepare to be quizzed by them on the confidentiality of the results.

Once students are reassured, you can expect to see a better response rate every time you do another set of online evaluations without suffering any breach of confidentiality.

---

4: Bothell, T.W & Henderson, T., “Do online ratings of instruction make sense?” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No. 96, Winter 2003, p. 69

### **Best practice #3: Use student portals**

Student portals can be used at three different levels to encourage, remind, or compel students to finish their online evaluations.

#### **Level 1: Encouraging students through portal integration**

At the mildest level, students can complete their online evaluations from a new function in the student portal.

This simply provides students with convenient access to another service, with no attempt to compel them to action.

#### **Level 2: Annoying students through portal reminders**

At this level, students are reminded about any overdue evaluations every time they access the portal. This mild annoyance helps compel them to action.

But always remember: A higher response rate driven by annoyance may deliver lower-quality responses. Students may answer simply to get rid of the reminders, rather than to provide honest feedback.

#### **Level 3: Compelling students through portal blocking**

At the most severe level, students cannot get their grades until they complete all course evaluations.

This approach will yield response rates similar to in-class evaluations, but the quality of these responses will likely be no better.

By compelling students to answer, you may not get honest or thoughtful responses.

### **Best practice #4: Provide a small incentive**

One study found that while response rates did drop somewhat for online versus in-class evaluations, there is a straightforward way to restore the balance.

The study concluded, “If one wishes to achieve online response rates that are similar to in-class response rates, a very mild incentive should be offered.”<sup>5</sup>

In this case, offering students a very small grade incentive, such as 1/4 of a percent (0.25% on a grade of 100%) erased the difference in response rates between online and in-class evaluations.

Before being implemented, this kind of incentive would likely need to be blessed by the department or the entire faculty, but it costs nothing to a college, and is clearly effective at motivating students.

### **Best practice #5: Select a system that’s easy to use**

One reason some moves to online have failed in the past is because they were hard to use. With growing computer literacy, this issue is less critical today.

But you must make certain that your online system demands no learning curve. And your questionnaires must be built so they are clear and simple to fill out.

Together these measures remove any confusion that can limit response rates.

**Hint:** *Every vendor will tell you their system is easy to use; make sure to get demos that prove it. Some web-based systems are easy to use, only because they are so limited in functionality. Don’t allow ease of use to replace the powerful analysis and flexible reporting that you need.*

---

5: Curt J. Dommeyer et al, “Gathering faculty teaching evaluations by in-class and online surveys: their effects on response rates and evaluations,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, October 2004, p. 619

**Best practice #6: Select a system that can scale up for your entire student population**

Fast response is vital to prevent lag time and to accommodate everyone who wants to fill in an evaluation at the same time. If there is an unacceptable wait between questions or screens, students will abandon the process, and response rates will drop.

Consider a typical university with 10,000 different sections and an average class size of 25. To evaluate every section means gathering 250,000 responses. And if every student takes an average of five courses, a poorly designed system can have up to 50,000 students trying to use it at once—if it can handle that many.

Good system architecture builds scalability. For example, to avoid lag the system should be able to balance the load between various servers, and to spread the total student population across successive periods.

You can fill in the numbers for your own college or university in Figure 3. If you seek to do online evaluations for every section

Line	Item	Your Campus
A	Courses/sections to evaluate online	
B	Average class size	
C	Total responses (A * B)	
D	Average number of courses per student	
E	Potential number of students all doing evaluations at once (C / D)	
F	Total student population	

**Figure 3: Scalability at Your College**

offered at your institution, lines E and F should be close in value. If you seek online feedback for some subset of sections, E will be less than F.

In either case, this is what “scalable” means for you: Your online system must be able to support the concurrent number of users shown in line E, and ultimately scale up to the number in line F to give you room for future expansion.

**Hint:** *Every vendor will claim their system is scalable. Look for successful installations where a system supports more than your total student population. This means more than any assurance that some system is indeed scalable.*

**Best practice #7: Be sensitive to cultural factors**

Certain cultural or political factors can slow down, or even derail, any attempt to move away from paper.

Among these are student trust, IT readiness, and even computer literacy. Be sensitive to these factors, and prepared to move slower than you might like to accommodate them.

**Student trust**

Trust is a precious commodity that must be earned and protected. A single data breach can set back this trust by years. In some locations, there is less tradition of anonymous feedback than in others.

Be ready to answer questions and build student trust; do not expect that you automatically have it from the onset.

**IT readiness**

To support online course evaluations, your campus IT must be developed enough to provide a campus-wide secure network, and a reliable e-mail system. If these basic pieces of IT are not in place, it may be too early for your campus to move to online evaluations.

## Computer literacy

Most students in the developed world know how to browse the web and fill in on-screen forms. But in certain settings, or for certain students, this may not be the case. Provide extra instructions or a paper option so that no one is left behind because of a lack of computer literacy.

### **Best practice #8: If necessary, move online in stages**

You may need to move to online in incremental steps, rather than at all once. It's feasible to run a pilot project, or to designate some portion of your courses to be evaluated online in the first round.

Here are three specific strategies for phasing in online evaluations in stages, rather than all at once.

### **Do some evaluations on paper, some online**

You can use a mix of paper and online questionnaires, as long as your system supports both, so that paper questionnaires are easy to scan in. Then do your analysis online for more powerful processing and flexible reporting.

The first year, start with a mix of perhaps 60:40 or 80:20 paper:online, then nudge up the ratio in following years until you reach 100 percent online.

### **Send students to a computer lab**

Some institutions are not ready to use e-mail for online evaluations. In this case, you could use your computer labs. At the end of each course, schedule students to go to the lab to fill in their evaluations.

In following years, after everyone is comfortable with this process, you can enable students to use e-mails for doing evaluations. Of course, your system should be able to encrypt all e-mails related to course evaluations.

## Bring portable systems to the class

Instead of sending students to a computer lab, another approach is to bring online questionnaires to them. You can load PDAs, tablet PCs, or laptops with the online course evaluations, then bring them to the classroom. Students can use these devices on the spot, or take them away and return them with their evaluations complete.

This approach is only feasible for a small student population, since it demands many hardware devices and very tight control over their distribution. Such high overhead may well cancel out the benefits of the move to online evaluations.

### **Best practice #9: Act quickly to correct issues**

Nothing builds trust better than showing students how your institution acts quickly on the results of online evaluations.

Proving to students that you are listening and taking action on their concerns is probably the single best way to improve response rates.

Once students perceive that your college is taking steps to correct any issues they raise, they will more likely take part in the next online evaluations, and your response rates will gradually improve over time.



**When students feel your institution is taking action on the issues they raise, they are more likely to do online evaluations, and give many more comments.**

## Online evaluations deliver both operational and strategic benefits

Following these best practices can deliver both operational and strategic benefits to any college or university that moves to online evaluations.

### The operational benefits

Online course evaluations can deliver strong operational benefits to your college or university, including:

- ◆ **Substantial cost-savings** for printing, distributing, scanning, rekeying, filing, and archiving paper forms; after system startup, these savings can be at least 50 percent of the ongoing costs
- ◆ **Shorter questionnaires**, with no need to inquire about basic demographics, since the system is already aware of these facts (*see sidebar on intelligent confidentiality*)
- ◆ **More flexible surveys** that can accommodate faculty-level and course-level questions; these questions can be added to surveys by individual faculty or departments to study particular issues of interest
- ◆ **Easier support for your IT team**, since the new process likely replaces a patchwork of departmental systems with one modern, centralized system
- ◆ **Easier enhancements in the future** when you need to update survey questionnaires, design new reports, or track trends over time.

All these operational benefits save time, save money, add flexibility, and create better results. To most college and university administrators, all these operational benefits more than make up for any dip in response rates.

### The strategic benefits

Moving to online evaluations can also provide many strategic benefits that enhance the value of the IR group, including:

- ◆ **A “green” initiative** aligned with your institution’s environmental goals
- ◆ **More time for strategic projects**, since much less time is required for creating reports manually
- ◆ **Quick results that can factor into performance assessments** and other HR programs; IR can now deliver strategic information in time to be used by decision-makers
- ◆ **A completely transparent process**, if desired, so that students can review previous course evaluations before they register each year
- ◆ **Continuous improvement in academic quality**, thanks to the more detailed feedback now available.

All these strategic benefits enable the IR department to make a more visible and significant contribution to your college or university. These strategic benefits can help bring in a new era in the role of the IR department at your institution.

### Conclusions

Any college or university that implements these best practices for online evaluations can save time, save money, and generate better results; as well, the IR department can make a more visible and strategic contribution to the institution.

To find out more about how your college can gain the benefits of online course evaluations, visit [www.eXplorance.com](http://www.eXplorance.com) and register for a system demo at your convenience.