Upping Your Response Rate

A "Best Practices" Guide for Faculty Employing Online Course Evaluation at JMU

Basic Things to Keep in Mind

Here are some basic things to keep in mind when going into the course evaluation process:

- **Students typically don't understand the course evaluation process**
  Students don't see, and are not privy to, what happens after they fill out course evaluation. They don't know who sees the reports, nor how they are used or interpreted. They don't realize the impact that their evaluations can have.
- **Students may not realize how they personally benefit from course evaluations**
  Since evaluations are always done at the end of a course, and since, unless they failed, they will not take that course again, it is easy for students to perceive that there is not much for them to gain by filling out the evaluation.
- **Students generally like to be helpful and see themselves as part of a solution**
  JMU students like to see themselves as being a part of the larger JMU community. They like to contribute to their fellow students' learning and to feel that they are being helpful.
- **Course evaluation is not solely instructor evaluation**
  It's helpful to focus students' attention on the fact that the instructor is only one piece of the course that is being evaluated, and to remind them that there are many factors frequently beyond an instructor's control, e.g. time of day, syllabus/textbook used, assigned room, etc.
- **The most important outcome for a course is *how much the student learned***
  It is easy for instructors and students to buy into the notion that it is the instructor who is primarily responsible for student learning. There are many ways that students can take ownership of their learning and act in ways that improve a course, augmenting the efforts of the instructor.

Things you can do to improve response rate

Given these basic principles, it follows that increasing response rates for online evaluation can be achieved by doing the following:

1. **Do it in class**
   Even if you are not in a classroom that has computers, the Blue Response system that JMU uses is fully accessible from mobile devices like smart phones and laptops.
2. **Explain why it is important—important to *you* and important to *them***
   Even though they may hear this from multiple professors, it is important for you to make a personal appeal to students to complete the evaluations.

3. **Communicate via multiple modes**
   Announce it in class. Send email. Hand out a piece of paper with instructions and a brief explanation of why it's important. Through Canvas, you may even be able to send notifications directly to their cell phones if they have signed up to receive texts.
4. **Remind them**
   Make multiple announcements. Send multiple emails. You may change your style and tone in the reminders. Try funny.
5. **Use group incentives**
   To make this a truly course-wide effort, offer an incentive if 80% of the class has completed the evaluation by a certain date. It only takes a very small incentive to get students to cooperate, say, a few points added to the final exam score. Send out regular emails reporting on the percentage of the class that has responded. (Hint: If you announce that the class is at 75% when the goal is 80%, it will really get a lot of people to dive in to get the class over the hump.)

Sample Paragraph to Use When Introducing the Evaluation

Here is an example of the type of thing you might say to your class when introducing the evaluation:

Good day everyone. Today is the day when you get to evaluate this course! Before you begin, I'd like to take a few minutes to explain to you why the course evaluation process is important.

First of all, you may not be aware of this, but after every semester, I get and read all of the comments that have come in from my students. Both the positive comments and the critical ones are helpful to me. They help me to decide what things to change and what things to keep when I teach the course. For example, last semester one of my students commented that my PowerPoint slides were too cluttered. As a result of that, this semester I reformatted all of my slides, and I think many of you will appreciate that, even though you may not realize it is an improvement over last semester.

*Second, it is important to realize that **you** are benefitting from the comments that past students have written in ALL of your courses, just as you will bring benefit to those who take this course after you. It is one of the most important ways that we work together to improve the learning experience for everyone.*

Third, the evaluations you write play a role in how I am evaluated and are really important to me. Just as I work to be objective and considerate of you when I grade your papers, I hope you will extend me the same consideration when you write your comments. Negative comments are fine, but please be specific about aspects of the course that hindered your learning, and if possible, offer suggestions as to how these things could be improved.

Thank you very much for your effort and attention. This really does help me, and it really does help you. Take it seriously. It makes a difference.