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University Senate

Instruction, Curricula and Advising Committee

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Charge S-1104: **Online Teaching Evaluations, and Best Practices in Evaluation of Teaching Performance**: *Investigate best practices in the evaluation of teaching performance, in particular addressing the question of whether paper or online evaluation formats should be used and whether any appropriate safeguards can be put in place to make the use of whatever format or formats might be employed more efficient and accurate. Obtain data relating to changes in response rates and average evaluations since the adoption of online teaching evaluations. Respond to Senate Executive Committee by January 2012.*

The Student Instructional Rating Survey (SIRS)

The development and use of the Student Instructional Rating Survey (SIRS) form[1] to obtain feedback on the student experience within a course goes back to the creation of the Teaching Excellence Centers at Rutgers in 1990/1991. In 1992 the TEC began the development of scanable ratings forms. In the Summer of 1993 faculty bodies on each campus, as well as faculty at the Graduate School of Education, vetted the standard questions to be used on the form. In 1995, faculty on all three campuses voted to report the results. Initially the results were available in printed format. Later they became available on CD-ROM; in 2002 they moved online.

While SIRS is commonly referred to as a "teaching evaluation," that is not what it was designed to be. While a true evaluation could only be done by a peer with content knowledge, the Student Instructional Rating Survey is meant to be a "University-wide survey of students for their comments about their experiences in the classroom. The results are used by the individual instructors, departments, schools and the University for the assessment and improvement of teaching."[2] While the primary purpose of the SIRS may have been to assess *courses* and to help instructors improve their teaching, it has come to be used by students in making decisions about which courses/instructors they might take and by faculty and administrators in addressing classroom performance for personnel actions.

The first eight SIRS questions are formative in nature:

1. The instructor was prepared for class and presented the material in an organized manner.

    Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

2. The instructor responded effectively to student comments and questions.

    Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

3. The instructor generated interest in the course material.

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[1] Monica Devanas and Joseph Delaney of CTAAR, the Rutgers Center for Teaching Advancement and Assessment Research, met with the Senate Instructional Curricula and Advising Committee at their November 4, 2011 meeting on the Newark Campus. Much of the information and data presented in this report is based on information provided by them.

[2] http://sirs.rutgers.edu/

Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

4. The instructor had a positive attitude toward assisting all students in understanding course material.
   Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

5. The instructor assigned grades fairly.
   Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

6. The instructional methods encouraged student learning.
   Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

7. I learned a great deal in this course.
   Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

8. I had a strong prior interest in the subject matter and wanted to take this course.
   Strongly disagree ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Strongly agree ○ N/A

Questions 9 and 10 are summary in nature, it is the results of these questions that are reported for review and promotion processes. In the review process these results are included as part of the departmental review.

9. I rate the teaching effectiveness of the instructor as:
   Poor ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Excellent ○ N/A

10. I rate the overall quality of the course as:
    Poor ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Excellent ○ N/A

Previously, departments and individual instructors were able to request that specific questions be added to their SIRS forms; the results of those questions were reported only to the department/instructor. While departments can still add questions to the survey, with the online form there is currently no option for individual instructors to request additional questions.

From Paper to Online
While SIRS results became available online in 2002[3], the actual form that students are asked to complete did not move online until 2008. The move of the form online had a number of administrative advantages. It eliminated about $70,000 worth of paper costs annually; it allowed for virtual storage of what departments had to previously store physically; it enabled the system to provide data for Form 1A directly to the faculty member; and it significantly sped up the process of reporting results—with the paper forms CTAAR was employing about 15 students to just put the forms in order and it could take up to 8 weeks to tabulate the results.

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[3] As recommended by the Senate at their March 2001 meeting. http://senate.rutgers.edu/ratedata.html The Instruction, Curricula and Advising Committee report also noted that: "All parties consulted agreed that the majority of students would not bother to go online to complete the evaluation forms. This conclusion is in line with the experiences of other institutions where online evaluations have been attempted. Since without participation the data would be rendered useless, the Committee agreed that this is not a viable option."

Currently approximately 84 percent of university classes are having students fill out the form online. Students are notified via email once the online survey becomes available—generally about two and a half weeks before the course ends, although individual faculty may ask CTAAR to set up alternate survey dates for their specific course. Students who do not respond to the survey receive email reminders every three days.

It is up to individual departments to decide what format—paper or online--best meets their needs. Not all departments have chosen to use the online SIRS form. The New Brunswick Writing Program, for example, did a study of the completion rate of paper versus online forms, and found fewer of their students filled out the form online than in paper. Consequently they have chosen to continue to use paper forms. If a department has chosen to use the online form but an individual instructor in that department demonstrates a pressing reason to use paper surveys, CTAAR will honor that request if the department supports the request.

The perceived drop in completion rates since the switch to online is a major area of concern to faculty. It is especially problematic in cases where results that may reflect only a limited portion of a class are being submitted as part of a promotion or tenure packet. However, data that CTAAR has collected shows that while online compliance does result in a drop in response rate in small classes, in large classes the response rate actually goes up.[4] Across all courses, the average number of non-responses only rose from 11 in the Spring of 2008 (the last semester when every survey was still on paper), to 15 in the Spring of 2011.

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[4] It's postulated that this is because in large classes more students tend to not attend and therefore are not present when the print forms are distributed.

Average non-responses, Spring 2008 - Spring 2011
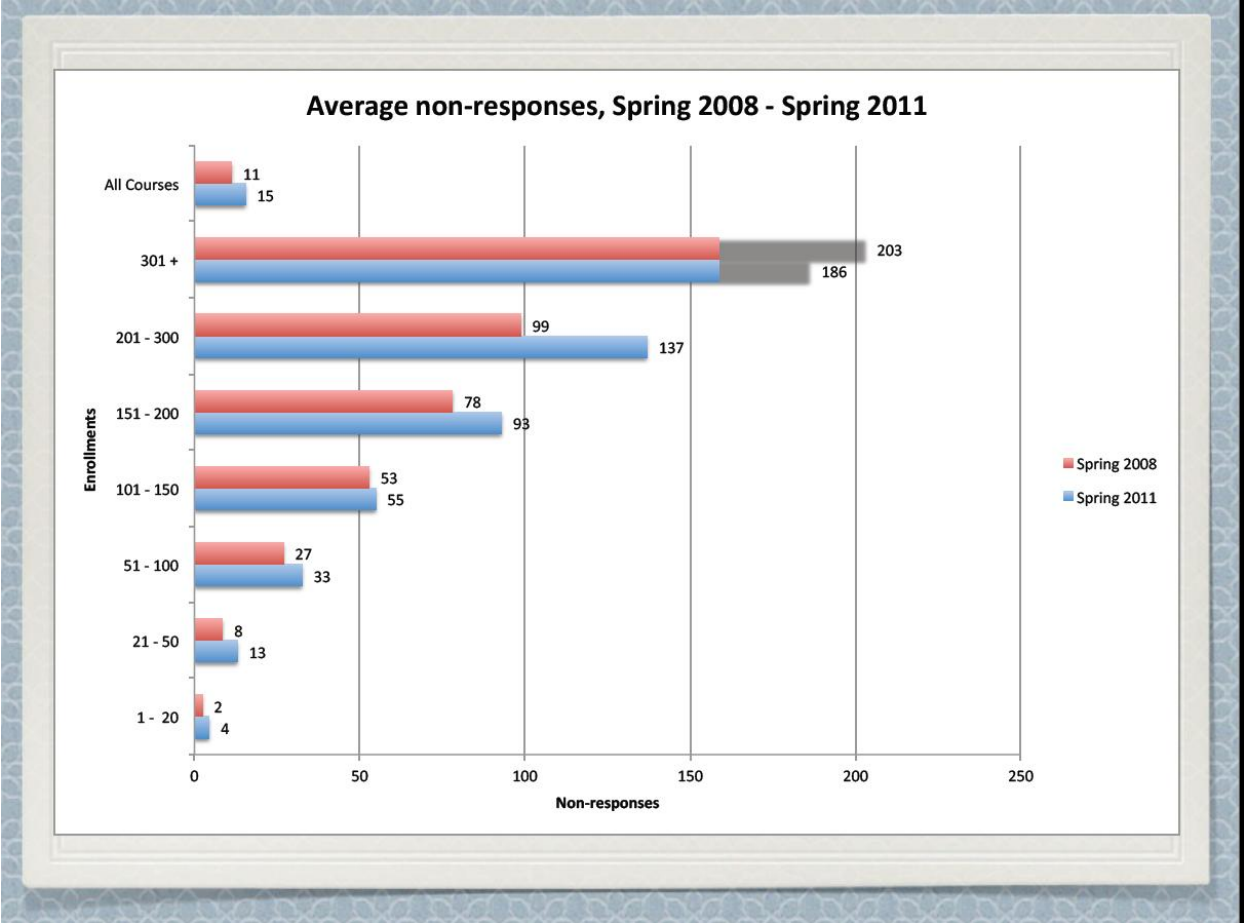
Joe Delaney, CTAAR

In total, about 55-60 percent of all students complete the online SIRS forms. While the mean is about the same as with paper forms, the standard deviation is much lower.

University-wide: Average Response Rate and Mean Rating
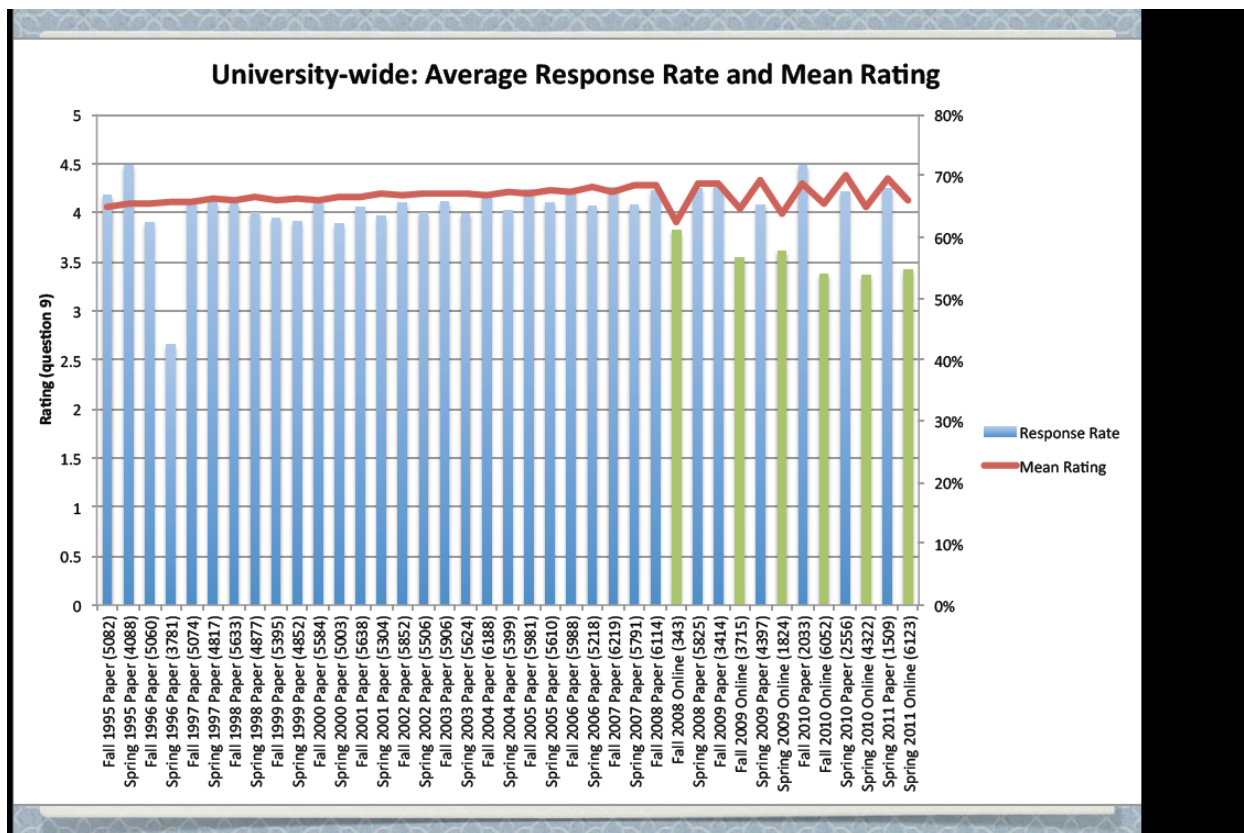
Joe Delaney, CTAAR

While individual instructors have had some success with offering incentives to students to complete the survey,[5] a 55-60 percent completion rate seems to be the norm at most large universities.[6] The University of Maryland, which has an extra credit incentive, still cannot get its completion rate above 60 percent for example. Students enrolled in eCollege online courses do have a 90 percent SIRS completion rate—the system at some point will deny them access until the survey is completed.

Differences in Mean Rating Between Paper and Online Surveys

While the mean rating for SIRS Question 9, "I rate the teaching effectiveness of the instructor as," remained fairly consistent for the period when only paper forms were available, there is consistently about a -0.2 difference between the mean rating for Question 9 for forms completed online and forms that are still being completed in paper. There may be any number of reasons for this discrepancy. For one, a greater number of students in very large classes are filling out the survey online and it is known that mean ratings in large classes tend to be lower than those in smaller classes.

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[5] A faculty member in the New Brunswick Economics Department, for example, offers his students ½ percent extra credit for completing the SIRS a well as a survey in Sakai and a post-course test.
[6] Based on a CTAAR survey of AAU colleagues. The exception are those institutions that have included an "I do not choose to participate" option that then counts towards the completion rate.

It should be noted however that summary data for online surveys is calculated separately from the paper surveys, and the results differentiated from reports generated by CTAAR. Means for each class are shown along with the "Mean of Course" (the weighted average score for all sections of the same course combined offered during the same semester); the "Mean of Department" (the weighted average score on the question for all courses within the same subject and school code); and the "Mean of Level" (the weighted mean score for all courses at the same level within the same school and department.)

So while the mean rating for an individual instructor may be somewhat lower as a result of the switch from paper to online assessment, the means to which that rating is being compared should also be correspondingly lower. Departments preparing personnel reviews need to be aware of this phenomenon and if necessary explain the reason for an apparent drop in the ratings for an individual instructor. They should also be aware that the change in assessment format may also be responsible for decreases in departmental means, at least some extent.

SIRS in Fully Online (eCollege) Courses

While the survey completed by students enrolled in online courses using the eCollege platform includes the ten SIRS questions, the full survey was developed by the Division of Continuing Studies to address issues specific to them and to online instruction. The processing of the data and reporting of the results is the responsibility of Continuing Studies and not CTAAR.

There are a number of significant differences in the collection and reporting of survey data between eCollege and SIRS.

Students in courses using the eCollege platform must complete the survey or lose access to the course site. As a result, the response rate for eCollege courses is generally about 90 percent—significantly higher than the response rate for other courses. On the other hand, some students have reported that they have been barred from their course site even though they filled out the course evaluation in Sakai or directly in SIRS. In order to avoid multiple access points, CTAAR asks departments to indicate which courses are being offered in eCollege and which ones should be using the online SIRS. Unfortunately not all departments comply with this request. In addition, some faculty teaching online courses may prefer that their students use the online SIRS survey so as to take advantage of the departmental comparisons and may deliberately be encouraging duplication.

Survey responses for eCollege courses are sent only to the instructor unless other arrangements are made with Continuing Studies.

eCollege surveys currently only provide course mean—there are no means for department or level. Departmental means are required for Form 1A. Once a year CTAAR is sent the data for classes rated in eCollege. CTAAR is responsible for taking the eCollege results and putting them into a form similar to the SIRS results sheet so that they can be used on Form 1-A for those

candidates up for reappointment, tenure or promotion. This data needs to be searched manually and is frequently missing instructor names, so that additional verification from instructors is required.

If there are multiple sections of a course, all the instructor's names are reported on each report; individual instructors need to identify their own reports.

SIRS and Other Teaching Assessment Practices

While the summary SIRS ratings offer a quick and convenient quantitative measure of classroom performance for personnel review purposes, they are certainly not the only—or the best—tools that could or should be used.

In May 2002, the University Senate approved the report of the Senate Faculty Affairs and Personnel Committee on *Charge S-0109, Best Practices in Assessment of Teaching*. <http://senate.rutgers.edu/bestprac.html> Among the recommendations approved were:

> 2. The Committee commends the process of mentoring, peer observation and peer evaluation used by the History Department-New Brunswick. We recommend that departments assign a teaching mentor to every first year untenured faculty member in consultation with that faculty member. Mentoring activities may include meeting periodically to discuss teaching, visiting each other's classes, co-teaching courses, reviewing instructional materials, and other aspects of teaching and student advising. We recommend that all departments conduct, taking steps to ensure that there are consistent guidelines and procedures for this process.

> 3. Departments should encourage faculty to develop a teaching portfolio for use in evaluations for reappointment, promotion and tenure.

>> a.   Written comments from students can be included in the portfolio. All written student comments should be available, at least in the supplementary materials, to every level of the reappointment, promotion and tenure process.

>> b.   A personal statement concerning teaching philosophy and accomplishments as well as scholarship and service should be included with the reappointment or promotion/tenure packet.

Almost ten years having passed since the above report was discussed and approved, it is perhaps time to reiterate and reinforce the importance of teaching development and assessment practices such as the use of teaching mentors and the development of teaching portfolios. Such proactive approaches can result in genuinely improved teaching (which may well be reflected in their SIRS ratings) and give faculty the opportunity, as noted in the 2002 report resolution, to "be provided mentoring and feedback on their teaching prior to being evaluated for reappointment, promotion, and tenure."

Mid-Semester Course Assessment

ICA has previously (2004) issued a report on the Mid-Semester Course Assessment: http://senate.rutgers.edu/icacmidsemestercourseassessment.html . As stated in that report:

> Research shows that the most useful course assessment is often a mid-semester instructor-generated assessment which allows for adjustments prior to the completion of the course. Unlike the required end-of-semester course evaluations, a mid-semester course assessment is a formative assessment designed solely to provide information and feedback to an instructor and to allow for development and improvement of a course in progress.

CTAAR developed and made available an online Midcourse Survey that allowed faculty to conduct an informal, anonymous survey of their students prior to the end of the course. Questions are formatted by the instructor who decides on what topics they would like to receive feedback from the students; survey results are seen only by the instructor. CTAAR is currently recommending the use of the very easy to use Google survey instrument in ScarletApps <http://ctaar.rutgers.edu/technology/googleForms.html> for instructors wishing to set up midcourse, or other progressive, surveys. Many instructors continue to use paper surveys that they have developed to conduct periodic evaluations; others are using clickers to survey their students in class.

Paper vs. Online

An online SIRS form clearly offers administrative and economic advantages to both CTAAR and departments, as well as timely access to results to both faculty and students. However some departments—those with primarily small classes where a high completion rate is deemed critical, for example—may decide that the advantages of a paper survey outweigh the disadvantages and may choose to continue using paper. That option should remain available to them.

Those departments opting to use paper should however make sure that student privacy is protected. For example, any comments added to the form should be compiled by the department and then shared with the instructor.

The completion rate that Rutgers is experiencing for the online SIRS seems to be right in line with that of other large universities. While some individual instructors have had some success with offering incentives to students to complete the survey, the Committee did not feel that offering incentives across the board would be appropriate. Eventually it may be possible to have students complete the survey online in class. The development of a mobile application for the survey could move us in this direction.

Teaching/Course Assessment

While SIRS may have been designed primarily as a course assessment instrument, in the minds of most students it is an instructor evaluation. Its use in personnel actions enforces that notion. It is certainly not however the only--or the best--means of either evaluating or improving instruction. Best practices would dictate the use of teaching mentors and the development of teaching portfolios as more effective and significant in these areas.

Greater advantage should also be taken of the use of progressive surveys, such as quarterly or midcourse assessments, which allow for adjustments and improvements as a course is in progress.

It would also be helpful if individual instructors could once again add questions that meet their specific needs to the survey.

Recommendations

Recommendations Regarding Online vs. Paper

1. While there are demonstrated advantages to continuing SIRS as primarily an online survey, some departments may have legitimate reasons to prefer in-class, paper surveys. That option should remain available to them.
2. Departments opting to use paper surveys should develop procedures to ensure that student privacy is protected.
3. Departments wishing to survey students about particular aspects of their class experience (for example, physical facilities or textbooks) should request that those questions be added to their SIRS surveys.
4. In order to avoid duplication and unnecessary confusion for students, departments should consistently notify CTAAR as to which courses/sections are being offered through eCollege and which require the online SIRS.
5. CTAAR should investigate the possibility of developing a mobile app for the SIRS.
6. CTAAR should investigate database modifications that would enable individual instructors to once again add questions that meet their specific needs to the SIRS.
7. Departments preparing personnel reviews should be aware that there is consistently about a -0.2 difference between the mean rating for Question 9 for forms completed online and forms previously completed in paper, and if necessary explain in their review the reason for an apparent drop in the ratings for an individual instructor.

Recommendations Regarding Best Practices

8. In accordance with previously approved recommendations of the University Senate,[7] departments should provide mentoring and oversight for every first-year instructor, and should encourage faculty to develop teaching portfolios and other mechanisms for use in evaluations for reappointment, promotion and tenure.

9. In accordance with previously approved recommendations of the University Senate[8] instructors should be encouraged to develop their own midcourse, or other periodic, assessments, which would allow for adjustments and improvements as a course was in progress.

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[7] Best Practices in the Assessment of Teaching <http://senate.rutgers.edu/bestprac.html> May 2002.
[8] Mid-Semester Course Assessment <http://senate.rutgers.edu/icamidsemestercourseassessment.html> February 2004