

Online Course Evaluations
EPC Report to the BFC
19 April 2011

Earlier this year, two task forces began work on developing a campus-wide system for online course evaluations (OCEs). The Education Policies Committee has met with chairs and representatives of those committees. This fall, the EPC intends to develop a policy proposal concerning the content and use of OCEs. In the meantime, this report outlines major issues which should be addressed in such a policy.

1. Course evaluations are currently optional (though not, in practice, for anyone hoping for promotion or reappointment). The OCE will be by nature universal and obligatory, no longer depending upon faculty to decide whether to have them administered. The EPC does recognize the need to place a lower limit on class size, below which a student could not reasonably expect anonymity.

2. Any OCE policy must take into account all consumers of the data produced, asserting the faculty's central role while recognizing the needs of other groups. These groups include students; immediate supervisors (of courses, departments, or schools); campus-wide administrators; and, possibly, the public.

3. Any policy must also address the greater flexibility of OCEs, including the potential to administer course- or program-specific, unaggregated questionnaires to students at other times and for other uses than the traditional semesters' end course review.

4. OCEs will make it virtually certain that data about students' evaluation of courses and instructors can and will be compiled and utilized in new ways. In its discussions, the EPC identified five uses of the OCE. Three of these are likely to be central functions, to be addressed in whatever end-of-the-semester instrument is developed:

- promotion/tenuring/merit reviews of instructors/faculty
- program and course review
- student course selection

In addition, OCEs have a formative role, allowing instructors and programs to acquire information useful for the evaluation of teaching, and to encourage student self-evaluation (that is, questions meant to provoke reflection on the part of students); these goals may be served by questions in the semester-end survey, or through questionnaires administered within courses at another time.

5. Content: When a question bank is prepared, the EPC expects to be able to review the questions; other faculty bodies (the Faculty Affairs Committee, the Gen Ed Committee) may also wish to review them. It is assumed that any system will allow for questions to be composed at the school, department, and course level as well.

6. Access: the possibilities here range from highly restricted access (in which data on only a few questions are available to students and administrators) to open access, in which all data is made available to everyone. A particular concern here is the collection of students' answers to free response questions, which would now be storable and searchable; these might therefore be offered only on formative questionnaires.

7. Process: while administering the OCE will now be automatic, any policy must consider whether faculty can choose the time at which students are given access to the course's questionnaire, and whether students will be able to respond during class time.

8. Searching and storage. The EPC will consider whether access to data should be paired with the ability to search, interpret, and organize data, and whether data should be stored indefinitely.

9. Participation. OCEs tend to have lower participation than in-class evaluations. There are many ways to encourage student participation, not all of which may be appropriate.

10. Interpretation: The data produced by OCEs depends upon the cohort with which data from one course or instructor is compared, and upon the criteria for determining proficiency or excellence. OCEs also present the possibility of correlating individual evaluations with grades earned.

11. As recent problems with the e-drop system remind us, electronic systems are not invincible. Should a back-up paper system be maintained, or is the loss of a semester's worth of evaluations not critical to the university's mission?