Chapter V

Online Course-Ratings and the Personnel Evaluation Standards

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Abstract

Many institutions of higher education are considering the possibility of conducting student evaluations of teaching (course-ratings) online. Some campuses have already implemented online evaluation systems that collect, process, and report ratings data electronically. Information on the successes and challenges of these systems is beginning to emerge. This chapter outlines some of the most salient advantages and challenges of online student evaluations of teaching within the context of how they relate to The Personnel Evaluation Standards set forth by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE, 1988). The authors also provide suggestions for successful implementation of online evaluation systems.

Introduction

Ten more minutes and the class will be over. The professor rushes through the last two slides of the lesson, and then introduces the course-rating forms, while asking the students to give honest feedback. One minute later the professor leaves the room, and
the only sound that can be heard is the scribbling of pencils as students fill in bubbles on the course-rating sheets.

Will this traditional picture of course-rating become as foreign to future students as the picture of a typewriter is to the current generation of computer-savvy students? The answer to this question will be determined in part by the degree to which the practice of rating courses online replaces traditional paper-based rating in college classrooms.

A considerable number of institutions have already partially or completely replaced their paper-based course-rating systems with an online system (Clark, 2003). Although the practice of rating courses online is still in its infancy (compared to the last 75 years of paper-based ratings), it seems appropriate to step back and review advantages and challenges associated with online course-rating. This chapter reviews online course-rating in view of how it compares to the traditional paper-based method. Because course ratings often influence faculty rank and status decisions, as well as course modification choices, this chapter is written in light of the personnel evaluation standards established by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE, 1988). Standards are included that have the most potential for highlighting differences between online and paper-based course-ratings. Also, this chapter provides a set of recommendations for those using or intending to implement online course-rating systems on their campuses.

Online Course-Rating Systems

Perhaps the most comprehensive volume to date dealing with online course-rating systems is the winter 2003 edition of New Directions for Teaching and Learning (Sorenson & Johnson, 2003). Within the chapters of this volume, online course-rating systems are compared to paper-based systems in five main areas: psychometric properties of ratings results; response rates; issues of security; logistics and confidentiality; and cost analysis. Based on results of various research and individual case studies, the authors list advantages of an online rating system: time savings, flexibility, quantity and quality of written comments, timelier reporting, and overall cost savings. Challenges in using an online system discussed in the volume include: low response rates, possible response bias, dependence on technology, high initial costs, data access issues, student perception of compromised anonymity, lack of control of conditions under which students complete ratings, and culture change. Evidences of these advantages and challenges are specifically cited within the subsections of this chapter as they relate to the personnel evaluation standards (JCSEE, 1988).

Paper-based course-ratings have been a vital part of instructor and course evaluation in higher education for many decades. Hoffman (2003) conducted a national survey “…to determine the extent to which institutions have adopted the Internet for data collection and reporting of student evaluations of instruction” (p. 25). In his study, Hoffman used a random sample of 500 U.S. institutions of higher education. He found that “…paper-based evaluation remains the predominant method of data collection in face-to-face courses” (p. 28). Only 10% (26 of the 256) of those replying to the survey indicated that