Research Summary – Improving eCIS Return Rate

At the University of Texas at Austin, faculty who teach online courses do not have the option of administering paper-based Course Instructors Surveys (CIS). They must use the electronic form (eCIS). Several Moody College of Communication faculty have reported extremely low eCIS return rates for online courses. However, one faculty member reported a return rate of 85% for a 2018 online summer course. This document summarizes research on online course evaluation return rates and evidence-based strategies for boosting return rates.

In October 2010, UT Testing Services conducted an evaluation of electronic versus paper CIS use at UT Austin (Hartos, 2010). Findings include:

- Electronic surveys are not widely used across campus and student response rates differ between electronic and paper surveys
  - Only 15% of classes used electronic surveys between Fall 2005 and Spring 2010.
  - Overall, adjusted student response rates were 23% higher for paper surveys than for electronic surveys.
- Despite differences in response rate for electronic and paper surveys, electronic survey use has little impact on overall instructor and course ratings, but courses and instructors do.
  - Overall, adjusted means for overall instructor ratings are slightly higher (.03 on a five-point scale) for paper than for electronic surveys.
  - Overall, adjusted means for overall course ratings are slightly higher (.03 on a five-point scale) for paper than for electronic surveys.

These findings are consistent with the literature. Many studies have found that response rates for online course evaluations are consistently and significantly lower than paper-based evaluations conducted in class (Avery et al. 2006; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Guder and Malliaris 2013; Morrison, 2011; Nulty 2008; Stowell et al. 2012). Studies comparing paper-based and online formats found that ratings did not change or improved slightly for online evaluations (Anderson, Cain, and Bird 2005; Avery et al. 2006; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Ernst 2006; Fraze et al. 2003).

A study by Paquette, Corbett, and Casses (2015) found that “students perceive evaluations of faculty as a formality with little influence on the delivery of instruction.” They also found that students perceived that faculty did not communicate the value of the evaluations and did not utilize reminder strategies, such as sending email message.

The UT Testing Services web site offers the following suggestions for improving eCIS response rate:

- Discuss in class the uses for and importance of student feedback on the survey
- Send students personal reminders by e-mail and educate them about the importance of their evaluations.
- Utilize class time to "administer" the mobile-adaptive eCIS to students (just as in paper CIS administration)

Published 2019
Research by Berk (2012), Guder & Malliaris (2013), and Chapman & Joines (2017) reflects that these are effective strategies for increasing response rates. Goodman, Anson, and Belcheir (2015) additionally found that using a mid-semester check-in was also helpful in improving responses rates.

The faculty member who achieved an 85% return rate used the following strategies:

- Conducted a mid-semester survey and used the student feedback to make adjustments in the class.
- Explicitly set the expectation that “part of the deal for giving mid semester feedback was also giving feedback at the end.”
- Ran polls throughout the semester to get student input on student preferences and needs.
- Repeatedly (3 times) told students their feedback matters.
- Sent reminders to complete the eCIS.
- Gave extra activity points for completing the final eCIS survey. To receive the points, students had to post a screenshot of the completion confirmation screen, not the evaluation itself.

Some faculty find using point-based incentives to increase eCIS response rate to be a dubious practice. It can be viewed as transactional or coercive. However, research shows that extra credit is one of the most successful strategies for boosting course evaluation response rates (Dommeyer et al, 2004). Sundstrom, Hardin, and Shaffer (2016) explored using micro-incentives. Students were offered the equivalent of 0.24% of the overall course grade for completing the survey. If at least 70% of the class completed the evaluation, everyone received the extra credit. In two separate studies, they found that micro-incentive increased response rate to 80% or higher. Goodman, Anson, and Belcheir (2015) found that the use of incentives (points) was the single most effective tactic to improve response rates, by a wide margin. Additionally, Goodman et al found that a class-wide incentive awarding extra points to the whole class if a high threshold response rate is achieved was effective and simpler to administer than individual incentives. Van Drie-Yockey (2017) found the following two techniques to be effective:

- Placing the link to the survey within the online course significantly increased response rate to 74%.
- Offering a class-wide extra credit micro-incentive so all students received extra credit if 80% of students completed the survey significantly increased response rates to 87%.

CIS Coordinator Jody Miller stated that UT does not have a policy about awarding extra points for completing end-of-semester surveys (phone conversation, October 3, 2018). However, Miller expressed concern that students should also be provided another avenue for earning bonus points.
References


