TECHNICAL REPORT

Electronic Course Instructor Survey (eCIS) Report

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John V. Kucsera
and
Dawn M. Zimmaro

CENTER FOR TEACHING + LEARNING

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

http://ctl.utexas.edu/

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Executive Summary

As many universities move from paper-based to online delivery of student course evaluations, many faculty members are wary of possible problems, such as the impact on lower response rates on overall ratings and threats to instructors' privacy posed by expanded public access to sensitive data—particularly students' comments—in states with open records laws.

This report summarizes three studies designed to address three goals:

> (1) to review policies and reports on electronic student evaluations from 11 institutions comparable to the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin)

> (2) to review response rates and overall ratings from paper and electronic evaluations at five other institutions with published findings

> (3) to investigate response rates and overall ratings from paper and electronic Course Instructor Surveys at the University of Texas at Austin

The ultimate goal of this report is to present findings concerning whether an electronic Course-Instructor Survey (eCIS) system provides information and security comparable to that of the paper-based CIS system, to better inform the decisions of stakeholders at UT Austin.

The research findings support several conclusions and recommendations:

Key Conclusions
(p.20)
- Most UT Austin peer institutions have replaced or are beginning to replace their paper systems.
- Initially, response rates are lower for electronic than for paper systems at both UT Austin and at other institutions, but rates tend to increase over time as institutions continue to use electronic student evaluations.
- The two most common strategies for improving electronic response rates are sending e-mail reminders and informing students about the importance of their evaluations.
- Online evaluations may be less susceptible to non-response bias than are paper evaluations.
- Overall course and instructor ratings do not differ significantly between paper and electronic forms, either at UT Austin or at other institutions.

Key Recommendations
(p. 20)
- Continue the eCIS pilot study.
- Continue to monitor the implementation of electronic course evaluation systems at peer institutions.
- Identify possible methods to maintain or increase response rates for eCIS.
- Continue to track eCIS and paper CIS response rates over time.
- Explore mechanisms for ensuring the confidentiality of typewritten student comments in electronic course evaluations.

Full Report

Background

Student evaluations are the most widely used approach to measuring college teaching effectiveness (Marsh 1984, 1991; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001), with numerous studies indicating that well-constructed paper-based evaluations are valid, reliable, and accurate (e.g., Cohen, 1990; Feldman, 1989; Greenwald, 1997; Marsh, 1987; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001). However, with the advent of improved technology and environmental concerns, many institutions are turning to online systems in place of traditional paper-and-pencil administrations during class near the end of a course.

There are many benefits to an electronic student evaluation system. Colleges and universities can reduce costs associated with the use of paper order forms, questionnaires, and summary reports; an electronic system costs about 50% less than a paper evaluation system (Bothell & Henderson, 2003). Electronic systems also allow instructors to request student evaluations online and to receive the results more quickly. Students can complete an evaluation anywhere, anytime (within a designated period).

Electronic systems provide better security, eliminating many of the handling issues associated with paper questionnaires, from the student volunteer who collects and delivers forms to the departmental official who transfers the forms to a staff member of the evaluation center. Moreover, students may feel more secure about the anonymity of their responses on electronic evaluations, because students are not providing handwriting cues.

Electronic evaluations may have the potential to improve the usefulness to instructors of the results of student evaluations. In place of a pre-existing evaluation template, most electronic systems allow instructors to construct their own set of questions and to choose their own format. The evaluation report can contain Web links to comparison statistics or to faculty development information on how to improve teaching skills related to specific questions.

Yet, the use of electronic evaluations raises three primary concerns among many faculty members. First, faculty members are wary of the potential for the use of electronic systems to lead to a decrease in overall course and instructor ratings, due to factors such as respondent bias, lower response rate, or students' aversion to completing something "extra" outside of class time. However, studies have generally found no consistent differences in overall instructor ratings between paper and electronic evaluations, although some variation exists from study to study (Gamliel & Davidovitz, 2005; McGhee & Lowell, 2003; Sorenson and Reiner, 2003).

Second, several institutions (for example, Duke University, Kansas State University, Northwestern University, University of Colorado at Boulder, University of Idaho) have indeed reported that response rates have decreased upon the introduction of electronic evaluation systems (Johnson, 2003). Among the possible explanations for response rate

decline are technical problems, inconvenience, and a lack of student motivation to complete evaluations online or outside of class (Ballantyne, 2000; Dommeyer, Baum, and Hanna, 2002).

A decline in response rate can increase the possibility of non-response bias, which means that evaluation results may be biased if responses from students who complete the evaluation are different from responses that would have been provided by students who did not. Generally, the lower the response rate, the more likely it is that non-response bias will occur. As a result, many institutions are devising incentives and strategies to prevent lower response rates.

Third, faculty members are wary of the implications of expanded public access to students' comments. Texas open-records law provides that survey results accessible to a department or college are also available to anyone with a legitimate educational or business need who chooses to file a freedom-of-information request. Institutions must provide the results after redacting information that could identify students, as provided by the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA).

Institutions using paper evaluations are exempt from requests to obtain information about student comments, based on the argument that the handwriting on paper evaluations identifies students. However, when institutions adopt electronic evaluations, student comments are typed, and they are, therefore, not identifiable and are subject to public access after redaction of other identifiable information. As a result, electronic evaluations may allow greater access to student comments that, in the view of some administrators and faculty members, should remain private communication between students and their instructor.

In summary, electronic student evaluations provide a range of benefits for universities, but apprehension exists because of potential problems with their use. Institutions planning to implement electronic evaluations may find helpful a review of the strategies of universities that have adopted or that are planning to adopt such systems. Because institutions' experiences with lower response rates and overall ratings have varied from study to study or institution to institution, a direct investigation of these concerns is advisable at any institution that is planning to adopt an electronic evaluation system.

Purpose

The purpose of the first study addressed in this report was to review policies and reports on electronic student evaluations from eleven UT Austin peer institutions. For peer institutions that were adopting or considering an electronic student evaluation system, three questions were asked. First, what has their research shown concerning response rates and overall course and instructor ratings for an electronic system in comparison to paper evaluations? Second, what strategies were they using in response to potential or actual lower response rates? Third, how were they managing access to students' written comments?

Because many of the peer institutions had not published data relevant to these questions, the purpose of the second study addressed in this report was to review differences in response rates and overall ratings between electronic and paper evaluations at five other higher education institutions, chosen because they had used or piloted an electronic system, had conducted a comparison study, and had published the results.

The purpose of the third study addressed in this report was to review differences in response rates and overall course and instructor ratings between electronic and paper Course-Instructor Surveys at UT Austin.

The overall purpose of this report is to summarize findings from these studies to assist UT Austin stakeholders as they formulate policies concerning the use of eCIS.

Study One

Method

The University of Texas at Austin has identified eleven peer institutions, based on size and mission, that are used for comparing institutional data:
- Indiana University at Bloomington (Indiana)
- Michigan State University (MSU)
- Ohio State University (OSU)
- University of California at Berkeley (Cal)
- University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA)
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Illinois)
- University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (Michigan)
- University of Minnesota at Twin Cities (Minnesota)
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC)
- University of Washington at Seattle (UW)
- University of Wisconsin at Madison (Wisconsin).

For this investigation, the research team accessed from each university's website technical reports, committee reports/minutes, research policy documents, newspaper articles, and any other published material related to electronic student evaluations. The team used Boolean terms in the keyword search directory and targeted each institution's testing, measurement, evaluation, or faculty development center responsible for evaluation systems. The team analyzed content they found in relevant publications to determine explicit themes and patterns related to the research questions.

Findings

Using electronic evaluations. The only university using an electronic evaluation system campus-wide and in full replacement of paper questionnaires is Cal (Berkeley Law, 2008). Michigan will follow, shifting to a completely online system in fall (Office of Evaluations and Examinations, 2008) or winter term 2008 (Gnagey, September 2007).

Four universities appear to have a system in place, but the electronic evaluation forms have not fully replaced paper surveys, or they are not being used widely. OSU began offering an electronic form at the end of fall 2003 (Council on Academic Affairs, 2003). A completely online system was proposed in December 2005 (Faculty Club). However, as of May 2006, the university was offering both paper and electronic forms to departments and faculty (Council on Academic Affairs). Wisconsin also appears to be offering both electronic and paper evaluation forms to faculty (Testing and Evaluation Services, n. d.). UW is recommending their electronic evaluation system to instructors who teach course content at least partially by means of the internet (Office of Educational Assessment, 2005). A majority of the UNC campus is still using paper forms, but "the paper-based Carolina Course Evaluation survey will be replaced by the online UNC Course Evaluation System soon" (Center for Teaching and Learning, n. d., paragraph 5). The School of Medicine at UNC has already made the transition to an electronic evaluation system (Office of Educational Development, n. d.).

At the other five universities, movement toward electronic systems is in various stages. Illinois is piloting an online system (Measurement and Evaluation, March 2008). Indiana appears to have replaced their electronic system as of August 2007, but no other information was found. It was not possible, for example, to determine whether evaluation forms are used campus wide. Minnesota has piloted an electronic system, but the forms appear to be used in online courses only (Office of Measurement Services, 2008). For MSU and UCLA, no publications were found regarding electronic evaluations.

Comparison research on response rates and overall ratings. Four universities that are using an electronic evaluation system or that have piloted such a system have published findings concerning a comparison of response rates for electronic and paper systems. Two of the universities have also published findings concerning a comparison of overall ratings. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparisons of response rates and overall ratings for paper and electronic evaluations from institutional pilot studies

Institution	Term	Unit of analysis	Response rate		Overall ratings
			Paper	**Electronic**	
Minnesota[1]	Spring 2003	3 college units	74% (5013 sections)	65% (220 sections)	n/a
	Fall 2003	3 college units	74% (5095 sections)	60% (352 sections)	
Cal[2]	Fall 2004	22 courses in 6 depts.	n/a	20% average	n/a
	Spring 2005	22 courses in 11 depts.			
	Fall 2003 & Spring 2004	School of Education	80%	40%	
OSU[3]	Since 2001	n/a	78 % average	52% average	4.34 for paper and 4.26 for electronic
Michigan[4]	Fall 2002	2 engineering courses	74%	75%	Average electronic ratings were .15 point (statistically significant) lower than paper in both studies.
	Winter 2005	70 courses in 3 depts.	80%	65%	

Publication source: [1] Senate Ad hoc Subcommittee, 2004; [2] Leadership Development Program , 2005; [3] Test Administration and Scanning Services, n. d.; Council on Academic Affairs, May 2006; [4]Task Force, March 2007.

In the Michigan pilot study, further comparisons were made between electronic and paper responses from the engineering courses. Although the mean electronic ratings were .15 point lower than the paper ratings (a statistically significant difference), electronic ratings were found to be as reliable as paper ratings. A similar percentage of students wrote comments under both the electronic (61%) and paper (63%) conditions. The average length of comments was also similar under both conditions: 52 words for electronic and 54 for paper.

Managing the potential decrease in response rates. Along with the four universities that explored rating differences, UNC (School of Medicine) and Illinois have published strategies for managing possible or actual declines in response rates for electronic evaluations. These strategies are presented in Table 2. The most frequent strategies mentioned are using e-mail reminders and educating faculty and students about the importance of student evaluations.

Michigan administrators, however, cautioned against sending too many reminders by e-mail. In pilot studies, students received separate e-mail reminders for each of their classes. As a result, some students received as many as a dozen e-mails. One administrator indicated that this e-mail redundancy seems to be an especially important problem, and a system programmed to send one or two comprehensive e-mail reminders would address it (Gnagey, December 2007).

Table 2 Institutional strategies to handle possible or actual lower response rates for electronic ratings.

Institution	Strategies
Minnesota	Some courses in the pilot studies offered incentives for completing the electronic rating. However, the publication source did not indicate of the nature of the incentive (Senate Ad hoc Subcommittee, 2004).
Cal	The research team suggested that allowing student access to the quantitative results, educating students about the importance of evaluations, and using incentives such as prize drawings or extra credit points may improve response rates (Leadership Development Program 2005).
OSU	The institution tried a lottery incentive without much success (Council on Academic Affairs, October 2005). Reminders to students who had not responded within one week helped increase response rates (Test Administration and Scanning Services, n. d.).
Michigan	The Academic Affairs Advisory Committee (AAAC; January 2007) and the provost discussed possible incentives and strategies to increase response rates, such as a raffle system, increased priority for students who complete evaluations early, and evaluation in class via electronic devices such as laptops, cell phones, or clickers. However, the Task Force (March 2007) was against using incentives and sanctions, and it recommended using targeted announcements, frequent follow-up reminders, and community education about the importance of course evaluation. In the pilot studies, a reminder e-mail four days after the original request and a second reminder e-mail two days later were used.
UNC	The School of Medicine sends one reminder e-mail after the original request and a second reminder e-mail if needed (Office of Educational Development., n. d.).
Illinois	The system will send an e-mail to students when the evaluation form is available for them to complete. They will also receive one reminder e-mail after the original request and a second reminder if needed before the system closes (Measurement and Evaluation, April 2008).

Managing student comments. Five universities published information about how they manage or will manage student comments from electronic evaluations.

The School of Medicine at UNC sends student comments and aggregated quantitative data results to the instructor and to respective course/clerkship/selective director(s), departmental chair(s), and relevant committee members at the end of each semester (Office of Educational Development, n. d.). No information was found about sharing or posting results to students.

At the other extreme, Illinois does not send student comments to departments or post comments for student access. Student feedback is intended only for the instructor (Measurement and Evaluation, April 2008).

Instructors and administrative staff at Cal have access to electronic evaluation results, including comments. For instructors who give permission to have their evaluation scores posted on the Web, only summative quantitative data are shown; student comments are not posted (Berkeley Law, 2008).

OSU sends electronic student comments in a comma-delimited format to the instructor the week after final grades have been submitted. Comments are not part of the official evaluation instrument and are not stored by the registrar's office. Therefore, the e-mail message containing results is sent once, and then the comments are purged from the database (Test Administration and Scanning Services, n. d.). No information was found about sharing or posting results to administrators or students.

At Michigan, student comments on electronic evaluations are separated from quantitative results (Gnagey, September 2007). The evaluation center does not retain copies of student comments once they are forwarded to instructors. Deans and department chairs, in consultation with their faculties, determine who besides instructors will receive copies of ratings and student comments. (Gnagey, September 2007).

None of these institutions published information about managing student comments from electronic evaluations with regard to open-records requests. The research team contacted the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia to inquire about this concern, because Georgia has open records requirements similar to those in Texas, and many institutions of higher education in Georgia have implemented an electronic evaluation system. Catherine Finnegan, Director for Assessment and Public Information with the Office of Information and Instructional Technology (OIIT), reported that her office had not received an open records request for an online evaluation. She described institutions' responsibilities in her state. "In Georgia no evaluations of public employees are protected. Paper records as well as online records are equally likely to be hit by an open records request" (personal e-mail communication, July 15, 2008). "Student comments were [are] always included in the evaluation reports. Considering how open our law is I suspect that if we had received a request we would have had to provide the information even if we did not think of this as a formal evaluation" (personal e-mail communication, July 16, 2008).

Conclusion

Six out of eleven comparison universities have an electronic evaluation system in place, and three others appear to be developing such a system. At the institutions that published pilot studies, response rates and overall ratings for electronic evaluations were lower than those for paper evaluations. In one study, the reliability of ratings and the length of student comments were similar for electronic and paper evaluations. However, in view of the relatively small sample and in light of prior research findings indicating variable results from study to study, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

To manage decreased response rates, most of the universities use or plan to use e-mail reminders and to provide education about the importance of student evaluations.

In managing student comments, two of the five institutions using an electronic evaluation system appear to send comments to instructors only. One institution tasks departments to decide who besides the instructor should view student comments.

According to Georgia's Director for Assessment and Public Information, a higher education institution in her state using an electronic evaluation system would likely

include student comments in a response to an open records request for course evaluation results.

Study Two

Method

Five higher education institutions other than UT Austin's 11 peers were chosen for review. They were selected because they had published response rates for electronic evaluations and in some cases explored differences in response rates or in overall ratings between paper and electronic evaluations. Two of the institutions were expressly selected because they were early adopters of an electronic course evaluation system. Three of the institutions were randomly selected from a list[1] of institutions with electronic evaluation systems. The five institutions selected were

- Brigham Young University (early adopter)
- Northwestern University (early adopter)
- Pennsylvania State University
- State University of New York (SUNY), University of Buffalo
- Texas A&M University

Findings

Brigham Young University (BYU) is one of the first institutions to employ a campus-wide electronic evaluation system. Before implementation, the university conducted several pilot studies over a five-year period to address the concern about a decline in response rate with electronic evaluation forms. Johnson (2003) reported a steady increase in response rates for electronic evaluation forms across three studies:

- 40% in a 1997 pilot study with 36 courses
- 51% in a 1999 pilot study with 194 course sections
- 62% in a 2000 pilot study with 47 course sections.

Once BYU implemented the online system campus wide, the response rates were 58% in 2002 and 60% in 2003. According to BYU's Center for Teaching and Learning website (n.d.), the average response rate for recent semesters ranges from 59% to 64%, with a goal of 70% after continued implementation.

Johnson (2003) reported that a 1999 pilot study involving 74 of 194 total course sections found a 50% response rate for online evaluations and a 71% response rate for paper evaluations. BYU also explored non-response bias directly. In two studies (see Johnson, 2006, p. 13), online evaluation forms appeared to be less susceptible to non-response bias than were paper evaluations.

These findings suggest that, although response rates for online ratings were initially lower than for paper ratings at BYU, the difference is decreasing. In addition, even if the response rate is lower for online evaluations, the difference may not matter.

With regard to overall course ratings, studies indicate that there is no significant difference between paper and electronic course evaluations at BYU. In the 1999 pilot

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[1] The list was accessed at http://onset.byu.edu/index.php?title=Category:Institutions.

study, which addressed results from paper and online evaluations from the same 74 course sections, online evaluations were on average 0.1 point higher than paper evaluations (Johnson, 2003). In another study (Johnson, 2003) addressing the relationship between ratings from paper and online evaluations for 91 course sections, the correlations of overall ratings between forms were .84 (for overall instructor) and .86 (for overall course).

Northwestern University is also one of the first institutions to employ an electronic evaluation system. Their system went campus-wide in spring 2000. Average response rates until 2004 were below 50% (Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). In fall 2004, Northwestern implemented a policy in which students must complete their evaluations in order to view campus rating results. As a result of this strategy, the campus has maintained a response rate of 73-75% since 2004 (Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

With regard to overall course ratings, a pilot study (Hardy, 2003) including 26 courses (274 sections) at Northwestern compared results from paper and online ratings for courses taught by the same instructor over time, yielding three important findings:
- 11 courses had higher average online results (on the five core items) than paper results.
- 12 courses had higher average paper results (on the five core items) than online results.
- 3 courses had mixed results, with some core items rated higher in paper ratings and some rated higher in online ratings.

Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) is exploring an electronic evaluation system and has published summative results from three pilot studies (Office of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, n.d.):
- Fall 2005: average response rate was 62% for 63 course sections (8 courses).
- Fall 2006: average response rate was 66% for 226 course sections (64 courses).
- Spring 2006: average response rate was 60% for 123 course sections (79 courses).

In the fall 2006 study, average response rates for 22 of 64 total courses that used electronic evaluations were compared to response rates for 134 courses that used paper evaluations: the rates were 66% for online evaluations compared to 68% for paper (Linse & Baker, 2007). No publications were found that explored the differences in overall ratings between paper and electronic evaluation forms.

SUNY-University of Buffalo implemented an electronic evaluation system in 2004 with selected departments, totaling 65% of student enrollment. It appears that the electronic evaluation system has been implemented campus-wide, but the exact date was not found (see University at Buffalo Course and Teacher Survey, 2008, #2). In fall 2003, before electronic evaluations were in place, the overall response rate for the university was 70% (University at Buffalo Course and Teacher Survey, 2008). After electronic evaluations were implemented for at least 65% of the student population, the overall response rate was 40% in spring 2004 (University at Buffalo Course and Teacher Survey, 2008), 42%

in fall 2004, and 43% in spring 2005 (Online Student Evaluation of Teaching in Higher Education, 2008a).

With regard to overall course ratings for the same instructor and course section, the average paper rating in fall 2003 was 4.4, and the average online rating for the same item in fall 2004 was 4.0 (University at Buffalo Course and Teacher Survey, 2008). The publication source did not indicate whether this difference was statistically or practically significant. It said only, "There is variation, but not consistently, in any direction" (#16).

Texas A&M University uses an electronic evaluation system in 1,200 courses, 20% of the total courses offered. The university is planning to completely replace their paper evaluation system within three to five years (Online Student Evaluation of Teaching in Higher Education, 2008b).

In fall 2007, the average response rate for over 14,000 Texas A&M students in 1,218 course sections was 52%, a drop of 5% from the previous semester (Measurement and Research Services, 2007). The measurement center attributed the decline to the implementation by five new departments of online evaluations, more than doubling the number of courses using them. The center suggested that the overall response rate decreased because instructors may have not been comfortable encouraging students to complete the online evaluation form (Measurement and Research Services, 2007). In one department that has used the system the longest, the overall average response rate has increased from just above 50% in 2005 to over 70% in 2007. No publications were found that addressed differences in response rates or overall ratings between paper and electronic evaluation forms.

Conclusion

Response rates for electronic student evaluations increased over time for four of five institutions reviewed in this study. Penn State was the only institution where response rates were somewhat consistent over time and relatively high (over 60%). For the three institutions that published data regarding differences in response rates between paper and electronic evaluations, all reported lower response rates for electronic evaluations. However, as indicated by the two BYU studies that directly investigated non-response bias, the decline in response rates for electronic evaluations may not be much of a concern, especially when response rates increase over time. With regard to overall ratings, for the three institutions that published differences between paper and electronic evaluations, two institutions found no difference and one found some difference, with no indication whether the difference was statistically or practically significant.

Study Three

Method

In fall 2006, the pilot UT Austin electronic Course-Instructor Survey (eCIS) system was made available to all departments and colleges as an administration option. The Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment (DIIA) had piloted the eCIS system in a limited number of courses in fall 2005, spring 2006, and summer 2006. The intent of expanding the pilot system to the entire university was to evaluate administration processes and technical features of the system, to determine whether procedural or technical changes were needed.

The pilot study was not designed to support conclusions about the validity of eCIS data. Participating instructors were asked to inform their students about the eCIS procedure, and automatic e-mail notices were sent to students when the eCIS system was ready to use. Follow-up reminders were sent by e-mail to students, asking them to complete the eCIS. This process differed from the administrative process for the paper CIS, which is administered during class by a student volunteer without the instructor present.

The research team compared the eCIS and the paper CIS with regard to overall instructor and course ratings and response rates. They chose to consider overall instructor and overall course rating questions because these are the two items most heavily considered in promotion and tenure decisions. The team did not conduct statistical tests because of the absence of a true research design, in which comparison would be made between two sections of the same course taught by the same instructor, with one section completing the paper CIS and the other section the eCIS. Therefore, any interpretations of results from eCIS and paper CIS should be made with caution. The tables that follow provide only descriptive comparisons of data trends.

To investigate response rates as well as students' ratings of the instructor and of the course, the research team compared eCIS ratings and response rates for each of the participating course sections in fall 2006 with paper CIS ratings and rates for the same instructor and course from the fall 2005 semester. Only fall semester data were selected, in order to provide the most equitable comparison possible. Differences that could confound results may exist among students who enroll in courses during the fall, spring, and summer terms. The research team also compared eCIS ratings for each of the participating course sections in spring 2007 with paper CIS ratings for the same instructor and course from the spring 2006 semester. As with the fall semester courses, the team sought to ensure the most equitable comparison possible by selecting only spring semester data.

Findings

In Table 3, frequencies and response rate ranges are summarized for the fall and spring comparison semesters.

Table 3. Summary Information for Matched eCIS and Paper CIS Course Sections

	Fall 2006 (eCIS)	Fall 2005 (Paper)	Spring 2007 (eCIS)	Spring 2006 (Paper)
Total number of course sections	572	572	208	208
Total number of students enrolled	22,247	25,756	10,218	9,562
Total number of forms returned	13,422	16,293	5,073	5,788
Range of return rates across course sections	6 – 100%	4 – 100%	0 – 100%	0 – 100%

Two approaches were available for determining return rate: calculation of overall return rate and mean return rate. Overall return rate was calculated by dividing the total number of forms returned by the total number of students enrolled across all course sections. This calculation takes into account the various sizes of the course sections included in the analysis. Mean return rate was calculated by obtaining the arithmetic average of all the return rates for the sections, and this calculation does not account for course size. The results of both return rate calculations are presented in Table 4.

When the research team combined paper CIS section results for fall 2005 and spring 2006 and compared them to matched eCIS section combined results for fall 2006 and spring 2007, they found that eCIS sections had a 6% lower overall return rate. Similarly, they found a 10% lower mean return rate for eCIS sections than for paper CIS sections. Overall instructor and course ratings for eCIS course sections were equal or nearly equal (within 0.1) to the ratings for paper CIS course sections (see Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of Combined eCIS Results for Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 with Combined Matched Paper CIS Results for Fall 2005 and Spring 2006

	Fall 2006 & Spring 2007 (eCIS)	Fall 2005 & Spring 2006 (Paper)	Difference Between 2006/2007 - 2005/2006
Total number of matched course sections	780	780	
Total number of students enrolled	32,465	35,318	
Total number of forms returned	18,495	22,081	
Overall return rate	56.97%	62.52%	-5.55%
Mean return rate	65.16%	75.57%	-10.41%
Mean instructor rating	4.2	4.2	0.0
Mean course rating	3.9	4.0	-0.1

Conclusion

Given that these results are only descriptive, firm conclusions about the comparability of paper and eCIS systems results cannot be drawn. However, trends in the data suggest that response rates are somewhat lower (by about 6-10%) using eCIS but that overall course and overall instructor ratings remain relatively equal (within 0.1).

Overall Conclusion

The findings presented in this report appear to support previous findings in research literature on electronic student evaluations.

Response rates are generally lower for electronic evaluation systems in comparison to paper systems, both at other institutions and at UT Austin. However, response rates for electronic systems have increased at other institutions, perhaps due to the application of explicit strategies to increase response rates, perhaps due to greater familiarity, and perhaps due simply to the passage of time.

The principal concern with a response rate decline is the increased possibility of a non-response bias. However, the results of two well-designed studies conducted by BYU suggest that online evaluations may be less susceptible to such bias than are paper evaluations.

Overall ratings of the instructor and of the course do not differ between paper and electronic evaluations at most other institutions or at UT Austin. This finding provides further evidence that a decrease in response rate during the implementation of an electronic evaluation system should not be of great concern to faculty members and administrators.

Concerning the issue of open records requests for electronic student comments, no published information could be found for comparable institutions implementing or planning to implement an electronic evaluation system. According to Georgia's Director for Assessment and Public Information, their response to a request for electronic evaluations of a Georgia instructor would likely include student comments.

Recommendations

In view of the finding that overall ratings of the course and of the instructor do not appear to be affected by using the eCIS system, despite somewhat lower response rates, UT Austin should continue the eCIS pilot study and monitor the use of similar systems at peer institutions. The eCIS system provides potentially significant benefits, including improved security, reduced non-response bias, and lower administrative costs.

Because several questions remain even after review of institutional practices and research findings, three recommendations are made with respect to continued use of eCIS at UT Austin:
- Identify possible strategies for maintaining or increasing response rates for electronic evaluations.
- Continue to track response rates over time for both paper and electronic evaluations.
- Explore mechanisms for ensuring the confidentiality of type-written student comments in electronic course evaluations.

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