

Increasing Student Assessment Response Rates: Tips from Your Colleagues

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Last fall, PBCC joined hundreds of colleges and universities across the country that have migrated from a paper-based to an online version of their student assessment system. While our effort was a technical success, the issue of increasing overall response rates, which came in around 20%, still looms.

Of course, some classes had much higher response than others. In fact, 52 of your colleagues achieved at least a 60% response rate in one or more of their classes. While that doesn't sound like many, it does give us a starting place to ask a simple question:

How did you do it?

The 32 faculty members who responded offered some good advice on how to get your students to participate and provide valuable feedback on PBCC's courses and teaching. This paper presents some highlights of our informal survey.

Stressing the importance of the assessment and showing appreciation for students' responses

Many professors found that simply emphasizing to their students that they use the assessment and the comments to improve the course and their teaching went a long way towards generating student interest and response. Some added that it is the students' way to express their opinions on how the course has been taught.

Here's what a few had to say:

"I mentioned in class (or by e-mail in online classes) that I do read and appreciate their feedback and asked them to do the evaluation."

- Carolyn Allen, Biology, Boca Raton

"I just asked my students to respond, because this was a way for them to share their thoughts on me. I also explained to them that it's their voice of reason and that I really do take the time to read them."

- Lisa Korn, Teacher Certification Program, Lake Worth

"I told them how important it was for the instructors and administrators to be able to

hear the students' voices. I told them that these are read and that these evaluations are an important way for us to make changes and to grow at PBCC. I told them that this is how change comes about by us getting a chance to hear from the students."

- Bonnie Manley, Mathematics, Lake Worth

"I also emphasized the importance of being honest with their comments to evaluate the course for improvement. Let the students realize that feedback to the instructor regarding the course is just as important as feedback to the student from instructor on their performance. No one should complain if something is not to their compliance if they do not give the energy to help change it. Instructors need to evaluate their courses and strive to make it better for all."

- Judy McCauley, Dental Hygiene, Lake Worth

Debra Trigoboff, Boca Raton Wellness Center Specialist and adjunct professor of health at both Palm Beach Gardens and Boca Raton, tells her students specifically what she values most from the assessment:

"I always tell the students that I actually like reading the comments better than the check off list. I tell them that I really listen to their recommendations, and make changes to the course depending on what they say."

Different methods of offering extra credit

While some professors are okay with the idea of awarding a few points for completing an evaluation, others are understandably uneasy with the suggestion of extra credit. However, there is more than one way to approach this.

The simplest method is awarding a *nominal* amount of extra credit for completing the assessment. This proved to be an effective way of reaching students in many classes. Some professors simply awarded a number of points if a student brought proof of completion—the "receipt" students can print at the end of the process. Others checked their total responses regularly and awarded the entire class a few points if the response rate reached a certain level.

However, Hector Cruz-Lopez, adjunct professor of criminal justice at Lake Worth, came up with a twist on the extra credit dilemma and one that

may provide a compromise solution for those uncomfortable with the idea of awarding points.

“As an incentive, I told the my classes that I would add a 5% bonus question to the final exam if the response rate was over 50% and 10% if it reached 80%.”

An interesting concept to consider: Professor Cruz-Lopez doesn't award straight extra credit, but rather, he uses the student assessment merely as an opportunity for his students to *earn* extra credit.

Many instructors, maybe including you, award extra credit for a variety of class-related efforts: completing extra assignments, attending a speech by a guest lecturer and, obviously, answering bonus questions on an exam. If you give extra credit in your classes, you may want to consider tying one of these opportunities to either individual or cumulative participation on the course evaluation.

Regular announcements and reminders

It probably goes without saying that reminders are at least helpful if not vital in driving response rates. Several instructors noted that this worked well for them, particularly when combined with emphasis on the importance of completing assessments.

“Then I followed up for a couple of classes and asked the students to please do the evaluation online and gave them a pep talk on the importance of these evaluations.”

- Bonnie Manley, Mathematics, Lake Worth

“The strategy is not complicated. I told them about the evaluation process three times for reinforcement. On the first occasion I let them know that by using this instrument they get to effect change and express their desires and concerns.”

- Paul Friedman, Criminal Justice, Lake Worth

And don't forget, technology is our friend. Perhaps, try email reminders of your own to catch students while they are at a computer.

“The strategies that I have used in order to get feedback on the online course are simply constant reminders (about 4 weeks before the end of the course) via email. I also emphasize its importance to me, as I always need to

improve the course. I remind them that it is strictly confidential and no name is attached to the report that I obtain.”

- Louise Aurelien, Nursing, Lake Worth

“I emailed all the students as a class to remind them to do the assessment on line. Probably while they were reading my email they were on the computer and it was easy to remember to do the assessment.”

- Debra Trigoboff, Health, Palm Beach Gardens/Boca Raton

You may even find the technology available in your classroom to be beneficial.

“I used the computer and data projector to reinforce and clarify how the students could access the evaluation tool. The next week in class I did a verbal reminder, and the students indicated that they had received an electronic reminder [from IRE].”

- Kerry Flynn, Dental Hygiene, Lake Worth

And while you're at it, reminding them how simple the process is by providing instructions, perhaps through your course website, may boost response.

“I also sent emails to my students with a link to PantherWeb and instructions for completing the assessment. I posted an announcement on my course website.”

- Laura Heath, Mathematics, Boca Raton

Timing the reminder for greatest impact may have contributed to dental hygiene professor Judy McCauley's high response:

“I reminded the students within the last two weeks of the semester to respond, rather than announcing the ‘open window’ date. Too much time may cause them to procrastinate and hence forget completely.”

We agree. In the Fall 2007 administration, the notice was sent immediately after the window opened. There was a large response for the first few days, but it tailed off considerably after that, picking up only when registration opened and students again had a reason to log on to PantherWeb.

So for the Spring 2008 administration, we will hold the first notice until the final three weeks of the term, although the evaluation window will open and close at the same time.

Before you use the computer labs...

Some instructors took their classes, either in whole or a few at a time, to a computer lab to complete the assessment. While this is a tempting method that almost guarantees a high rate of response, there are major drawbacks that must be considered. Please read this section before deciding whether using the college's computers, either in the computer lab or classroom, is right for you and your class.

Probably the most significant downside of using PBCC's computer labs is that they simply are not equipped to handle the roughly 4,500 on-campus credit and college preparatory sections that will be covered each year by the online assessment. The load student assessments place on the labs *currently* is bearable, but this will not be the case if lab usage becomes an accepted and encouraged method of generating response.

On the other hand, classes held in computer classrooms do not require a field trip to the computer lab. While it is up to each instructor to determine if you want to use your classroom's computers for student assessment purposes, you should be aware that there still are shortcomings.

First, we have not developed strict proctoring procedures similar to those used for the paper-based classroom administration, nor do we anticipate developing them in the future. Also, lab and computer classroom usage nullifies two chief advantages of the online system:

For one, quality is sacrificed in favor of quantity. A timed student assessment cancels one of the most noteworthy benefits of the system—students are more likely to provide thoughtful commentary and usable feedback when they are allowed to complete the assessment on their own time.

Second, it requires spending valuable classroom time—more than ever was spent on the paper system if you take your class in whole to a lab.

We do not necessarily want to discourage this method out of hand, as it does expose many students to the system at this early stage. Hopefully, once they have seen it in your class, they will complete their assessments in other classes. However, we do not believe this to be a sound long-term strategy, and we encourage you to try some of the other means of increasing response presented in this paper.

Other thoughts

So far, we've presented only those methods used by a considerable number of faculty members who achieved high response. However, there were other unique methods that caught our eye. (Emphasis ours.)

"When the evaluations could be completed, I gave my students papers with complete directions on them that they needed to sign, date, and return indicating that they had completed the instructor survey. I think every student complied. I made it clear that the surveys were blind. I told them their feedback was important in perfecting the class for other students. I appreciated their honest responses, and I was humbled by much of what they had to say."

- Marilyn Tiedemann, English Prep, Palm Beach Gardens

"I post the evaluation as an assignment with a due date on the calendar at the beginning of the course; then I publish the link for the students once it becomes available. I always remind them at the end of the course that the evaluation is due stressing the fact that this is their opportunity to evaluate and offer recommendations for improvement relating to me as the instructor, the text and the course."

"I assign it as part of the class participation but it is not a graded assignment as I have no way of knowing if it was completed. I do find that if I set the expectation at the beginning of the course and follow-up with a reminder towards the end of the course, I have a larger number of students participate."

- Carol Alexander, Nursing, Lake Worth

"I had it listed in the syllabus in the calendar of things to complete and also posted an announcement about completing the assessment towards the end of the semester."

- Shalon Bull, Nutrition, Lake Worth/Boca Raton

"Since our accreditation requires continuous student assessment, after one of their online assignments they were asked to go to the online student assessment and complete them."

- Patty Moriano-Braga, Sonography, Palm Beach Gardens

Lake Worth EAP department chair Mike Sfiropoulos sums up the spirit of the student

assessment with, more or less, a “no fear” approach, giving his class this line to consider:

“I have been grading and evaluating you all the entire semester; it’s time for you all to evaluate and grade me.”

And if nothing else works, Bettee Collister, adjunct professor in PBCC’s paralegal program, offers these words of wisdom:

*“Well, I told them to print off the confirmation that they completed the evaluation and if I got enough of them, I’d **buy pizza**; it worked, I bought pizza!”*

In other words, just resort to the old standby: bring food. We won’t tell.

And we’re already thinking ahead

In addition to the email reminder change we mentioned earlier, there are other modifications we are making that we hope will ensure a higher degree of confidentiality.

First, we are now stripping all student IDs from assessment records at the end of an evaluation window. The IDs are necessary to ensure that only *your* students complete assessments for *your* classes and complete them only once, but after the window has closed, there is no need for us to keep this information.

Second, we are now holding all Express A evaluations until the end of Express B due to the growth of “combo” classes that allow students to take two levels of a subject within a 16-week period with the same instructor and classmates.

We hope you will try some of the techniques presented in this paper. Experiment with different methods until you find one that works for you. And don’t forget to log on to Employee Web regularly while classes are in session to monitor your response levels using the same procedure by which you get your reports.

If you have any further suggestions on how to make the online student assessment system a success, please feel free to contact us. Above all, we here at Institutional Research & Effectiveness are here to assist you in your endeavors.

For more information and additional resources, please visit www.palmbeachstate.edu/courseeval.xml.

***Appendix:
Survey results***

Below are the methods stated by the instructors who responded to our request:

Number responding:..... 32

Stressed the importance/appreciation: 10

Regular announcements/reminders:..... 10

Told students that responses are used to modify class/instruction:..... 8

Extra credit:..... 8

Took class to computer lab/classroom: 5

Class was conducted in a computer room/ computers available in classroom: 5

Stressed that it is the way to express opinion: 4

Emailed/provided instructions:..... 3

Emailed/provided link: 2

Sent email reminder: 2

Posted announcement on course website: 2

Gave in-class demonstration: 2

Emphasized confidentiality:..... 2

Listed it in the syllabus: 1

Had other students help with problems:..... 1

Tied to special event in class: 1

Made it a course requirement: 1

Just told them to do it: 1

Asked to complete following online assignment: 1

Had them sign a statement indicated they had completed it:..... 1

Pizza party if response reached certain level:..... 1