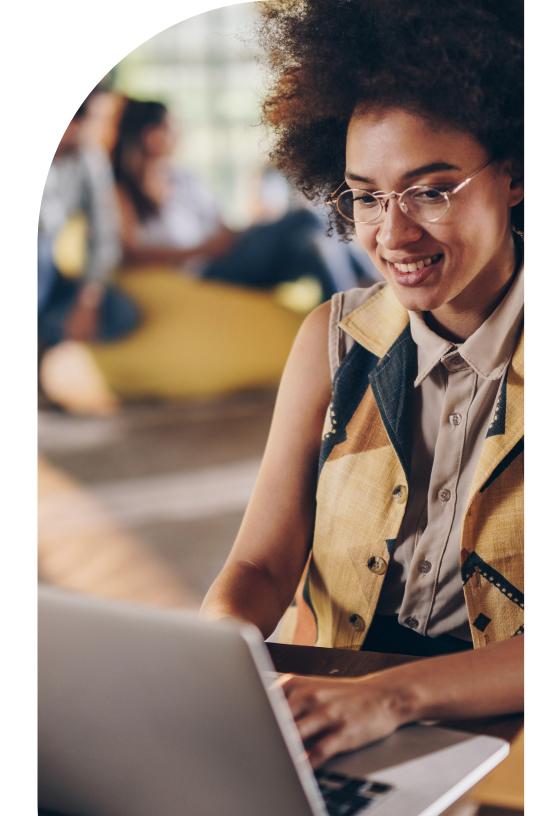qualtrics^{XM}

The ultimate guide to student course evaluations

The why, what, and how.

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Why should you carry out student course evaluations?

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Students ignore them. Faculty avoid them. And many hotly debate the appropriateness of student evaluations to determine faculty tenure or promotion.[1] Yet despite their mixed reputation, student course evaluations can be transformative for instructors who embrace the process and use the feedback for improvement.

Why should you carry out student course evaluations?

The most obvious benefit of course evaluations is they provide valuable feedback to instructors on their teaching effectiveness. Regardless of how the university uses this feedback to make employment decisions, instructors can and should use it to get an honest assessment of how students feel about the course material, workload, accessibility, and delivery. This information is key to identifying what's working and what's not.

"Whether the class is large or small, lecture or seminar, onsite or online, it can be a challenge to get students to engage. Whether we are simply attempting to get students to show up or take out their ear buds, or alternately, trying to challenge students to use higher-order thinking, we are all facing the same question," explains Dr. Elizabeth F. Barkley, author of Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty. Asking students how they prefer to engage and enlisting their feedback on aspects of the course, such as assignment parameters and assessment rubrics, helps students invest as co-creators.

[1] *Colleen Flaherty, "Even 'Valid' Student Evaluations Are 'Unfair.'" Inside Higher Ed, February 27, 2020.*

To this end, course evaluations also help instructors see students more clearly. As is human nature, instructors likely make assumptions about the students in their classes based on anything from appearance and attendance record to level of interaction and focus. Because these assumptions affect how instructors structure and teach courses, it's important they're validated with students. And the only way to do that is by asking.

$16B Institutions lose an average of $16 billion annually due to student retention failures.[2]

Finally, course evaluations demonstrate to students that faculty are learners, too. Vulnerability can be powerful: By opening up to feedback and criticism, instructors exhibit trust in students, which in turn bolsters their own trustworthiness.

Bottom line? The primary benefits supported by course evaluations – academic achievement, inclusivity, and trust – lead to stronger student engagement. And research shows that student engagement boosts retention and graduation rates, as well as an overall positive college experience.

[2] *Robby Franceschini. "The Real Crisis in Higher Education Is Mental Health." BluePath Health.*

What can you do to get the information you need?

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All surveys are not created equal. To get the most from student course evaluations, they must be designed and executed in a way that delivers the information you seek – as quickly and easily as possible.

The best student course evaluations are:

+ **Clear** Questions must be clearly written and encourage students to provide useful feedback, going deeper than simple Likert scale responses.

+ **Student-centric and course-focused** Questions should strike a balance in asking for both summative and formative feedback, focusing on the course from the student's perspective. For example, a student satisfaction question will be far less informative and actionable than queries about the course structure, textbooks, teaching strategies, etc. A good student satisfaction survey can help in this process.

+ **Neutral** Structuring value-neutral questions is critical to receiving useful feedback, as yes/no questions can be leading. For example, instead of asking "Did you feel you learned a great deal in this course?", ask something like, "To what extent do you feel you mastered the course content?"

+ **Engaging** Course evaluations allow students to feel heard, but only if the questions are relevant. While standardized questions allow for faculty to compare responses over time, questions that are too general, vague, or irrelevant can decrease participation and may even result in response bias.

+ Valuable Communicate the purpose of the evaluation and reinforce the importance of feedback to course development and delivery. Let students know that their input is essential for improvement and explain the actions you have taken or plan to take as a result.

+ Anonymous Recognize that students may have had negative experiences providing feedback to faculty members or other authority figures in the past. Students may hesitate to provide honest feedback if they fear being identified by their responses, so be sure they understand evaluations are anonymous. Consider omitting demographic questions, particularly in courses where there is only one student of a particular race, gender, or major.

+ Timely Along with formative cues as the class develops, a summative assessment can provide the kind of feedback faculty need to adjust courses and pedagogy to be most effective. However, course evaluations are only helpful if faculty receive the results in time to consider the feedback and make changes in subsequent courses.

Leading the charge for more substantive student course evaluations

In recognition of the inherent bias in traditional course evaluations, the University of Oregon has developed a holistic system designed to ensure teaching evaluation is fair and transparent, is conducted against criteria aligned with the unit's definition of teaching excellence, and includes input from students, peers, and the faculty themselves. *The new system* supplements the end-of-course evaluation with a mid-semester survey to allow for timelier feedback, and focuses more on student engagement than the teacher's methods.

Also, across the academic discipline, thought leaders and educators are *implementing new approaches to the student experience* — spanning everything from supporting student well-being and improving the K-12 experience (for both students and their families) to completely rethinking how they measure student success.

How can you maximise the value of student course evaluation data?

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Student course evaluations are only useful if students respond to them. In addition to creating your evaluations using the best practices identified in this ebook, consider the following recommendations for increasing response rates:

+ **Use a variety of channels** When you think of student course evaluations, you probably think of old-fashioned scantron forms and number-two pencils. But today's students spend most of their time on mobile devices. In addition to traditional in-class distribution, you can send your surveys via email, post a QR code on bulletin boards, or embed a link on web pages your students frequent, such as your class portal.

+ **Focus on quality versus quantity** While online survey response rates are typically lower than in-classroom response rates, digitization can help gather richer feedback. When students can access the surveys on their computers or smartphones anytime, anywhere, they are more likely to answer the open-ended questions — with more than just a word or two.

+ **Talk it up** You can't ask students to complete your evaluations and expect a big turnout if you only ask them once. Make several announcements, send reminders, and consider offering an incentive such as a voucher of their choice or discount codes to students who complete the survey.

“ *Courses and curriculum are always evolving, so student feedback about their experience in their courses is critical.”*

Elizabeth Carney, PhD

Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning, Washington State University

+ **Give it time** Consider allocating classroom time for students to complete your evaluations. “The fact that you, the instructor, are taking time out of class to allow them to fill out the evaluations does two things. It reinforces the importance of the task, and it also ensures a much higher compliance rate than students would otherwise achieve if writing comments were purely optional and subtracted from their free time,” explains Zachary Nowak, Harvard University lecturer. [3]

+ **Make it count** Talk to students about the importance of Course Evaluations. Explain what you do with their feedback. Whether through an in-class discussion or syllabus statement, explaining the impact of their opinions leads to more and more thoughtful responses.

[3] *Zachary Nowak, “How to frame course evaluations with your students”, Inside Higher Ed.*

Turning course evaluation data into actionable insight

Turning course evaluation data into actionable insight

It's not enough to simply collect student course evaluation responses. To make a legitimate impact, the information must be compiled and analyzed in a way that identifies trends, determines areas of concern, and illuminates solutions. This can be a complicated and time-consuming endeavor for even the smallest institutions.

Qualtrics Course Evaluations offers a sophisticated platform that automates and simplifies the entire course evaluation process. It allows users to ask the questions and define the logic, to distribute the survey(s) and capture the feedback, and to finally analyze the data and visualize the corresponding insights. This not only lowers the burden on faculty, but it also provides a faster, clearer path to the answers they need to act on for improvement.

Customer spotlight: Going digital streamlines process, facilitates responses

Located in Wayne, New Jersey, William Paterson (WP) University is a public institution with approximately 10,000 students. In fall 2020, WP began using the Qualtrics QClassroom platform to distribute and manage all student course evaluations electronically.

Qualtrics allowed WP to dramatically reduce the complexity of its evaluation. Previously, there were multiple variations across academic departments and faculty seniority levels, resulting in a mix of 750 questions. With Qualtrics, the university was able to create a single,13-question survey that uses branch logic to route students to relevant question blocks and collect feedback data in a central location, making it much easier to manage and analyze. Plus, going digital allowed students to access and complete evaluations on their own terms, improving the quantity and quality of responses.

SECTION 5

What's next?

What's next?

The conversation surrounding the appropriate use of student course evaluations in higher education is not likely to end any time soon. But with an easy-to-use digital platform that can streamline the process and help analyze the data to make insights richer and more accessible, there is no longer a question of whether or not they can be used effectively to assess the success of a course. The answer is a resounding, "Yes."

Having a pulse on which factors influence how your students feel about their experience at your institution is important — but now that you know where to start, do you have the appropriate platform to capture, analyse and utilise the data?

That platform is Qualtrics.

In our on-demand demo webinar, we explain how you can utilise our XM Platform to identify actions you, your staff and your wider organization can take to improve teaching, cultivate learning, directly develop faculties and drive student engagement. See it in action.

Build effective student course evaluations | **LEARN MORE**

Let's work together

With our XM Platform, you and your institution have everything you need to improve the student experience and build effective student course evaluations. This includes designing, managing and streamlining course evaluations, to driving improvement with built-in analysis and protecting data with best-in-class security and compliance.

Using these tools, you can build a system of action to improve teaching, foster learning, direct faculty development and engage students.

But that's not all; to help academics such as yourself — and teaching organizations globally — we've put together a guided course evaluation program to help you jumpstart your own process. This simple, three-step program will show you how to build your course evaluations, launch them and take action on the insights you've gathered.

**Are you ready to get started?
Optimize your academic experience** | **LEARN MORE**