

ACTION RESEARCH TEAM: PAPERLESS EVALUATIONS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH RESULTS:

1. The current evaluation system:

By talking to teaching assistants and administrators, we found that the current system is time and resource consuming. Over 300,000 sheets of paper are used each year throughout the undergraduate departments, valuable class time is set aside for students to fill out the forms during tenth week, and secretarial time and labor are required to process the evaluations. The Office of Instructional Development confirmed this information.

2. The alternative:

Different universities throughout the country have solved many of these problems by transitioning to online evaluation systems. By conducting online research, we found that Stanford University, Northwestern University, Eastern University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Boston College, and University of Michigan have all successfully completed this transition. We conducted phone interviews with the administrative offices of some of these schools in order to better understand the pros and cons of such a switch.

3. Instructor evaluations within UCLA graduate schools:

Several of the graduate schools within UCLA have successfully transitioned to online evaluation systems with relatively few obstacles. We discussed these issues with representatives from the David Geffen School of Medicine, the School of Law, the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, and the School of Environmental Engineering.

4. Student opinion regarding evaluation options:

We prepared an online survey and distributed it to UCLA undergraduate students. We received 827 responses, which were generally very supportive of a possible new online system. More than 80% of the respondents stated that they would prefer to fill their instructor evaluations online, for reasons ranging from improved sustainability to increased convenience to more class time to review for finals.

5. Faculty opinion regarding evaluation options:

We conducted personal interviews and email exchanges with approximately 30 professors and department chairs. Almost every single professor expressed strong approval of an online transition, for reasons ranging from increased practicality to improved feedback analysis potentials.

6. The opinion of the Office of Instructional Development:

Meetings with Joanne Valli-Marill from the Office of Instructional Development confirmed that the office has been considering the possibility of transitioning to an online system, and that they agree with all of our arguments.

DELIVERABLES:

The Office of Instructional Development (OID) plans to replace the current paper evaluation system with an online system in the 2010-2011 school year. Our research provided them with vital background information and school-wide feedback, which allowed them to go public with their plans. We also connected OID with the UCLA School of Nursing, which is interested in participating in a pilot program in the Fall.

OVERVIEW/ PROJECT GOALS:

The current paper instructor evaluation system in undergraduate departments at UCLA uses more than 300,000 sheets of paper each year, which translates to over 21,000 trees. It takes up class time during 10th week, when students should be reviewing for finals, as well as secretarial time, since the evaluations must be transcribed to protect student anonymity. Students rush through in-class evaluations, and rarely fill out comment sections. There is also a long processing period involved with a paper system, and professors must wait for long stretches of time before they receive student feedback. Many universities across the country have implemented online instructor evaluation systems in order to avoid these problems. Our Paperless Evaluations Action Research Team decided to research the feasibility of transitioning to an online system throughout undergraduate departments at UCLA. Our goal was to understand how students, professors, and the administration, approach the current paper system in order to get an understanding of how an online alternative could be implemented.

BACKGROUND:

We soon came to the conclusion that the benefits (both in cost savings and sustainability) of an online transition significantly outweigh the costs, and that there is overwhelming student and professor support for such a change. After meeting with Joanne Valli-Marill in the Office of Instructional Development, we discovered that UCLA administration had already been considering a possible online transition for the 2010-2011 school year. From that point, we teamed up with the Office of Instructional Development to provide them with a comprehensive literature review, background research on other institutions with online systems, and UCLA student and professor feedback.

INITIAL CONDITIONS:

We contacted TAs and faculty in order to investigate what currently happens to paper evaluations after they are completed. We obtained samples of the readouts that are returned to TAs after the evaluations are scanned and analyzed, including actual paper evaluations with comments and a statistical summary of the results. We learned that evaluation methods are not standardized throughout UCLA's campus, but are determined by individual departments.

The evaluations used by most undergraduate departments on campus are created by UCLA's Evaluation of Instruction Program (EIP), which is operated through the Office of Instructional Development (OID). The EIP also collects and analyzes instructor evaluations. Each undergraduate department has its own Evaluations Coordinator, who oversees the evaluations processes within the courses of the department.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY/DATA ANALYSIS:

STUDENT OPINIONS:

We created a short survey on surveymonkey.com and distributed it through Facebook. The survey consisted of ten questions that concentrated on two different evaluations options: paper evaluations in class or online evaluations at home. The questions were formulated to gauge student participation in the current system and measure interest in an online transition. We were very pleased with the response rates for the survey; by the end of the quarter, we had received 827 responses. Two of the most central questions included were: “What incentive(s) would motivate you to fill out an online eval?” and “Where would you prefer to fill out your instructor evals?”. The survey included several opportunities for written responses, so the student feedback was not limited to multiple-choice answers. For example, the question “What incentive(s) would motivate you to fill out an online eval?” received forty-six written responses. The additional input of ideas (i.e. coupons from vendors in Westwood, not wasting class time, and offers of extra credit) gave us more incentive possibilities to suggest to OID. Also, students rated the incentives that we suggested, giving us important data about what students want. Overall, we were pleased with both the quantity and quality of these responses. Receiving student feedback is an integral part of action research because it involves participation with key members of our social environments as well as the pursuit of practical solutions to problems within these environments.

PROFESSOR OPINIONS:

After speaking with Professor Cully Nordby and administrator Nurit Katz, we determined that the most common obstacle against online systems was a lack of professor support. In the past, professors had worried that students would neglect to fill out surveys if they were not presented to them in class. Therefore, we compiled a list of nineteen different department heads, chosen from a wide variety of UCLA undergraduate departments on campus, and sent out a mass email explaining our project and asking for feedback. We also set up face-to-face interviews with professors from over 15 departments throughout campus. We wanted to understand whether this was a legitimate concern on campus, and whether the professors would be open to an evaluation system that would guarantee student responses through some sort of incentive program (including withholding grades and/or sending repeating email reminders).

Out of the nineteen department heads emailed, a total of seven replied. They all stated that they would endorse a switch to an online system. Some replied that it was necessary to incentivize the process, and others maintained that students should be able to fill out evaluations without any incentives. Jan De Leeuw, from the Statistics department, implied that they might be interested in participating in a pilot program.

Almost every single interviewed professor had positive things to say about switching to an online evaluation system. Professor Christopher Mott of the English department, who is the TA coordinator for his department and has two large (and inconvenient) storage cabinets to accommodate past paper evaluations, was especially excited about the idea of storing evals in a digital archive rather than in paper form. Professor Todd Presner from the Department of Germanic Languages was thrilled about the new ways data from evaluations could be used, such as data query from year to year or by particular class. Multiple professors interviewed were positive about the idea of greater

customizability of questions in an online system, and the potential for longer written responses in a typed format. Some were also positive about the idea of achieving higher response rates through the use of incentives. A key concern among several professors was the preservation of privacy. More than one professor was worried about the potential of those not enrolled gaining access to the system. Professors were also concerned about not being able to prompt their students to answer in an online system as they would in class.

Professor Hunt, a professor in the History Department who currently teaches History 1C, predicts that there will be a similar student response rate under both paper and online systems. She has seen a 50-60% response rate under the paper evaluation system because there is not full attendance in classes and students who are present in class elect to not fill out the evaluations. However, Professor Hunt sees a potential issue with the quality of responses. Being in a classroom, even though the professor is not present, leads students to be relatively respectful in their comments. This respect may not be as clear in online evaluations because there is not the same in-person interaction. Another point that was addressed in this interview was whether the release of grades should be an incentive for filling out the online evaluations. Professor Hunt was indifferent on this point. The potential for the evaluations to be uploaded for student viewing was looked upon favorably. Professor Hunt's reasoning was that Bruinwalk already exists and any negative comments will end up on Bruinwalk either way. Overall, Professor Hunt was open to the transition to an online system.

Professor Robert Gould from the Statistics Department felt that the paper to online transition should have been made years ago. He said that he is one hundred percent behind the project. When asked about putting up the comments and ratings online, Professor Gould felt that using data from the evaluations would be a better and more accurate system than that of "rate my professor" and bruinwalk. He felt that since reviews were already being made online, they might as well be made more accurate. He felt that incentives, on the other hand, were not needed. Although he recognized that incentives might boost response ratings, he was uncomfortable with the idea of using an incentive to persuade students to fill out an evaluation. He thought that students should decide on their own to fill out an evaluation. However, he was in favor of email reminders.

Professor Louis Bouchard was completely behind the project, and felt that anything should be done to save the immense amounts of paper that we utilize during evaluations.

Professor Peter Narins was supportive of the project, but was concerned that the evaluations would not be filled out without the supervision of a teacher, and was curious about the different types of incentive projects that we had considered. Professor Steve Hardinger, on the other hand, was not supportive of the project on the sole basis that there would be no basis for comparison to previous year's evaluation because the method of evaluation would be so different.

Professors from both the Physiological Science and Microbiology, Immunology, and Molecular Genetics departments were highly supportive of an online switch. Professor Simmons (PhySci) had a lot of negative comments about current paper evaluations - the huge amounts of storage space that take up, the fact that they need to be kept years for promotion decisions and sometimes need to be copied, and just being a waste of paper in general, being a negative impact on our environment. He mentioned that at a university as large as UCLA, every single action we take has huge effects and that this would be a

great step in the right direction. Many of the professors interviewed said that time constraints of paper evaluations were problematic - they had to shorten their lectures and noted that it is a hassle to distribute forms and pencils to hundreds of students when they could spend that time doing something else, especially right before final exams. Professors Morrison and Simpson (MIMG) were very in favor that an online system would be authenticated - it would ensure that responses actually came from students and that they responded no more than once.

Professors Justin Zackey and David Rigby from the Geography department agreed that paper evaluations are wasteful and inconvenient, requiring much unnecessary labor for processing and analysis. They expressed that paper evaluations are not only unsustainable from an environmental point of view, but they are first of all not practical for professors and administration. Professor Rigby stressed that the evaluations take away 20 minutes of crucial lecture time; this time is not used effectively because students simply rush through the evaluation and end up leaving early. Regarding the question on whether or not students should be granted access to the evaluation results as an incentive, both professor observed that public evaluations and comments already occur on unofficial websites such as ratemyprofessor.com or bruinwalk.com, and offering an official platform for this would provide more accurate professor profiles. Both professors stated that they were surprised that a transition to an online system has not occurred yet.

Although some professors had concerns about response rates, they were not in consensus about incentives. One mentioned that offering raffle prizes would be ineffective with thousands and thousands of students filling out evaluations. Another liked the option of withholding grades until evaluations are completed, but also recognized that it would bias the outcome because those who had not attended lectures would be among the evaluators. Overall, course evaluations are taken very seriously even by tenured professors, and the opportunity for students to write more constructive comments provides a great opportunity for professors to shape the way courses are taught in future quarters.

UCLA GRADUATE DEPARTMENTS:

In order to get a better understanding of how to approach the switch to paperless evaluations in the undergraduate departments, we looked into the evaluation systems in place in the graduate departments on campus. We contacted graduate schools across a wide variety of fields, and researched those that had already made the switch from paper to online systems. The two largest schools that have already implemented successful online programs were the School of Law and the David Geffen School of Medicine. We spoke with several people in the office of the Law School to get information on their transition process and the software system that they currently utilize. Their evaluations are conducted through the School of Law's website. The online evaluations are not technically mandatory, but the school sends repeated e-mails encouraging the students to fill out surveys for each course taken. Students who complete all of their surveys are entered into a raffle with prizes such as iPod shuffles, and if 60% of the students in a class fill out the survey then the evaluations results become accessible to students. The School of Law did not face many obstacles in their online transition, but they differ from the undergraduate programs in that they have a smaller student population and did not face the same bureaucratic committee approval requirements.

The School of Medicine has had an online system since 1999. They use a third party software system, called CoursEval, and their evaluations are mandatory for all students. Students who fail to complete all of their instructor evaluations receive marks on their permanent records. The Environmental Engineering School conducts online instructor evaluations through the third party system EEWeb. The Nursing School does not currently have an online system, but representatives from the administrative offices have expressed extreme interest in our research and have offered to participate in a pilot program in the coming school year.

EXPERIENCES FROM OTHER UNIVERSITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY:

* Stanford University:

- use Online Course Evaluation (OCE) system designed by CollegeNET, delivered via self-service portal (like URSA)
- their pilot: winter 06; 2 dept = 85 classes, almost 1,200 students
- in spring 2006; 25 volunteer dept = 659 classes, about 6150 students
- response rates from 55-67%
- Incentive: The grade release program is used as an incentive for students who complete all their evaluations to see an early view of their grades. All students are able to see their grades two weeks after the grading deadline.

* Northwestern University:

- process is actually integrated with PeopleSoft student records system, real-time updates to class and enrollment information
- response rates from 65-70%
- Incentive: Students' ability to view the responses is based upon their participation in the evaluation process. If they do not fill out their evaluations for a particular quarter, they are closed out of using the system until they have successfully completed the next round of evaluations.

* Eastern University: <http://news.collegemedianetwork.com/news/eastern-goes-paperless>

- Incentive: e-mails are inviting students to complete evaluations

* University of Nebraska-Lincoln: <http://www.dailynebraskan.com/news/students-might-neglect-online-evaluations-1.2107683>

- strategies is to offer lottery prizes for students who fill out evaluations.
- Another strategy is to require that students fill out the evaluation to receive a credit, but sometimes there are bylaws prohibiting withholding student credits.

* Boston College:

<http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/faculty/evaluations/genfaq.html>

- Incentive: Students who complete all of their online course evaluations will have access to their posted grades on the first day of final exams.

- Students will receive an email announcement one week before the start of the course evaluation period. Subsequent reminders will be sent to students who have not completed all their evaluations.

- * University of Michigan: <http://www.umich.edu/~eande/tq/index.htm>

- http://www.ur.umich.edu/0708/Sep24_07/01.shtml

- Students will receive emails directing them to websites where they can fill out online TQ forms for the classes in which they are enrolled

- Students who do not complete evaluations continue to receive reminder emails until they fill out their evaluations, or until the evaluation period ends.

KEY FINDINGS:

Pros of online course evaluations:

- * Time savings, faster turnaround

- One school said it took an office anywhere from six to eight weeks to process the paper forms and type up the written comments. It can take several months for some of the larger classes

- Online systems eliminate the clerical bottleneck, and professors will receive their results as soon as ratings are collected. They won't have to wait weeks for paper reports to arrive.

- Evaluations are returned to the faculty member so long after the course is complete that the student feedback may no longer be useful.

- * Cost savings

- At BYU, paper evaluations cost \$436,000 (\$1.09/evaluation). Online cost is \$186,000 (\$0.47/evaluation). This is more than a 50 percent cost reduction when it switched to its system online.

- Paper-based evaluation systems require the printing, mailing, sorting, and scanning of hundreds of thousands of forms each semester.

- * Convenience

- Students are able to complete the evaluations on their own time, wherever they may be. All it requires is access to a computer.

- Students may appreciate the flexibility of online evaluations; they are able to take the evaluation whenever they have extra time, and may spend as much time as they need to complete the evaluation.

- * Opportunity for data analysis

- Paper course evaluation data is not maintained digitally, so they are unavailable for analysis.

- * More student comments

- Students make more comments about courses and instructors in online evaluations. For example, three times as many students made written comments after the Northwestern University rating system went online.

- On paper evaluations, students sometimes would like to write longer comments but there is not enough time in class.

- Students at other universities felt they could give richer, more thoughtful, and more useful feedback when they completed the online evaluation on their own, at a time of their choosing, with no time constraints.
- * Student anonymity
 - Student volunteers may have to hold onto the evaluations for a day or more and take them to the office when it is open, jeopardizing the confidentiality of the process.
 - Paper evaluations require many people to handle forms (professors, students who collect forms and deliver them to department offices, secretaries, campus mail personnel, evaluation center personnel), sometimes with little monitoring.

Cons of online course evaluations:

- * Possible lower response rates
 - The difference in online and in-class response rates at Michigan was about 10%. The difference between the two conditions appeared to be about 20% at both Northwestern and Brigham Young.
- * Technical problems
 - At one university, a delay in the automated e-mail system led to an extension on the deadline for submissions.
 - At another university, infrastructure outage interfered with the collection of evaluations two days before the end of the data collection period.
- * Depending on the students to take their own time out of class
 - This is where incentives would play a large part. If we design the system the appropriate way, we may expect a similar response rate as paper course evaluations.
- * Requires students to have computer access

COST ANALYSIS:

Our budget consists only of the subscription to the online survey service, surveymonkey.com, that we used to assess students' opinions in regards to the current system and a possible transition. The initial cost of implementation of the online system on campus will be covered by the Office of Instructional Development, from the pilot program to the campus-wide transition. It is our hope that an online evaluation system will be a beneficial long-term investment, and that the cost savings will soon refund the initial costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

After comparing several different incentive systems, we came to the conclusion that early grade releases would be the most effective system at UCLA undergraduate departments, since they can be administrated through the Office of the Registrar and seem more valuable to students than other types of incentive options. Next year, another Action Research Team should analyze the chosen incentive system and collect professor and student feedback.

Although we had to proceed with caution when looking into the cost benefits of an online system this year, maybe next year the OID will feel confident enough in the support for the new system to allow for more investigation into this aspect of the switch on the UCLA campus.

CONCLUSION:

Our Action Research Team provided invaluable background information for the Office of Instructional Development. With this research, they are now moving forward and have officially announced their plans to implement an online instructor evaluation system in the 2010-2011 academic school year. We were able to provide them with important information about the opinions of both students and professors about switching to an online system. We also created a review of literature and experiences from other schools that will surely continue to be of value to the OID as they move forward with this process.

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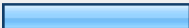
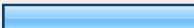


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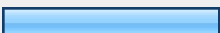
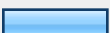

STUDENT SURVEY:

Paperless Evals




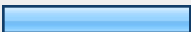
1. What is your gender?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Male 	34.1%	295
Female 	65.9%	569
<i>answered question</i>		864
<i>skipped question</i>		0

2. What year are you?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
First year 	6.0%	52
Second Year 	28.2%	244
Third Year 	28.9%	250
Fourth Year 	31.5%	272
Super Senior 	5.3%	46
<i>answered question</i>		864
<i>skipped question</i>		0




3. Do you fill out instructor evaluations that are handed out in class?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, for all of my classes 	76.3%	659
Yes, but only for the classes that I love or hate 	6.5%	56
Sometimes 	15.2%	131
Rarely 	1.6%	14
Never, I just leave early 	0.5%	4
<i>answered question</i>		864
<i>skipped question</i>		0








4. Do you fill out the Comment Section on the back of the form?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, with lots of comments 	11.1%	96
Yes, with a few comments 	36.1%	312
Sometimes 	32.4%	280
Rarely 	15.5%	134
Never 	4.4%	38
Wait, there's a back???	0.5%	4
<i>answered question</i>		864
<i>skipped question</i>		0





5. If you answered "Rarely" or "Never" to the previous two questions, why do you not fill out the evals in class?

		Response Percent	Response Count
They waste class time and I'd rather leave early		63.1%	135
I don't think my professors read them		19.2%	41
I DO think my professors read them, and I'm worried that they might recognize my handwriting if the comments are not transcribed		7.5%	16
Other (please specify)		28.0%	60
answered question			214
skipped question			650

6. Would you voluntarily fill out an online instructor eval for a class (without any incentives)?

		Response Percent	Response Count
No		9.7%	82
Yes		46.2%	391
Maybe		44.1%	373
answered question			846
skipped question			18

7. What incentive(s) would motivate you to fill out an online eval? (Choose as many as apply)		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Grades released earlier 	60.0%	508
Repetitive email reminders that stop once you've filled out the evaluation 	32.5%	275
Student access to course statistics 	67.7%	573
A thank you e-mail 	10.0%	85
Saving UCLA money 	64.1%	542
Helping the environment 	71.3%	603
Raffle prizes 	56.9%	481
Other (please specify)		48
	answered question	846
	skipped question	18

8. Do you think students should have access to results of evals?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, I want to know what other students thought of the class 	72.7%	615
No, I don't care about the results of instructor evals 	9.8%	83
Unsure 	12.1%	102
No, for some other reason 	5.4%	46
	answered question	846
	skipped question	18

9. Where would you prefer to fill out your instructor evals?

Online, at home



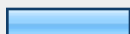
Response
Percent

Response
Count

81.8%

692

In class, on paper



18.2%

154

Why?

398

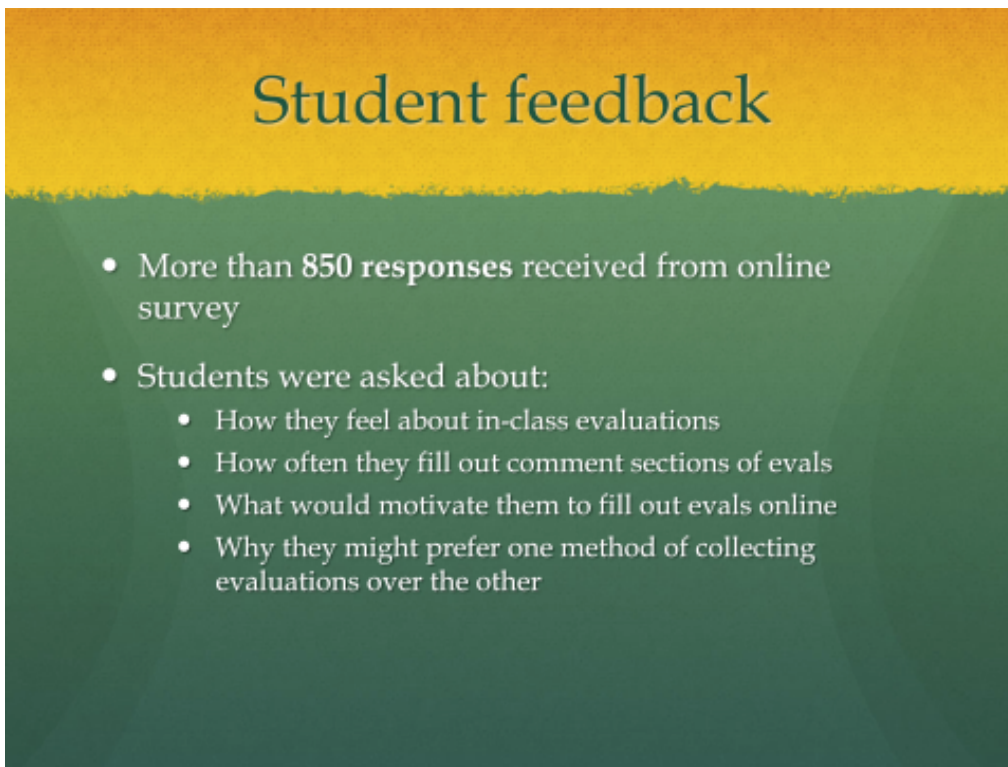
answered question

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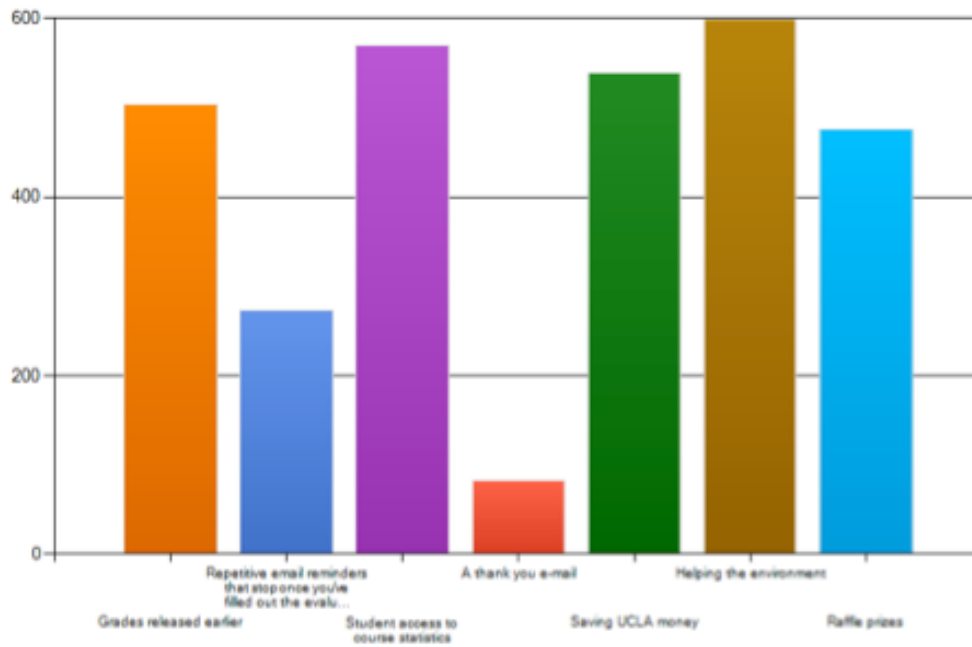
skipped question

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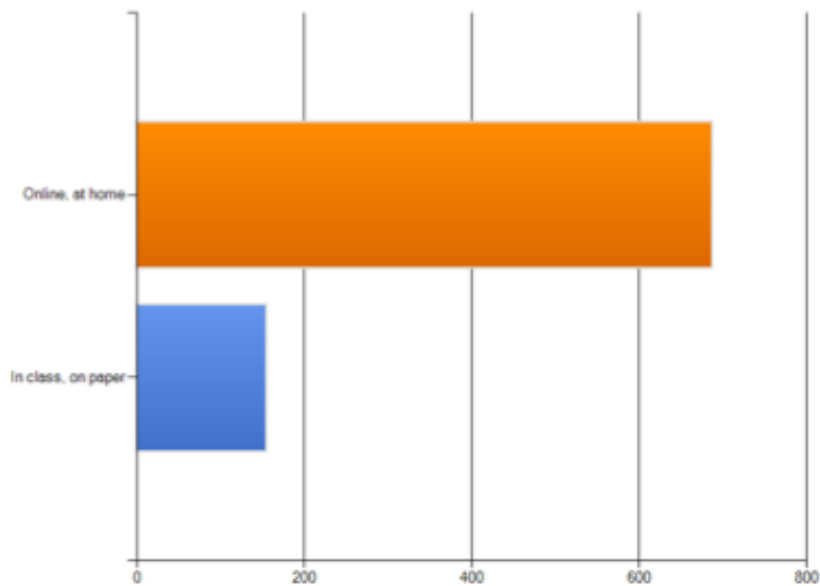
POWERPOINT PRESENTATION:



What incentive(s) would motivate you to fill out an online eval? (Choose as many as apply)

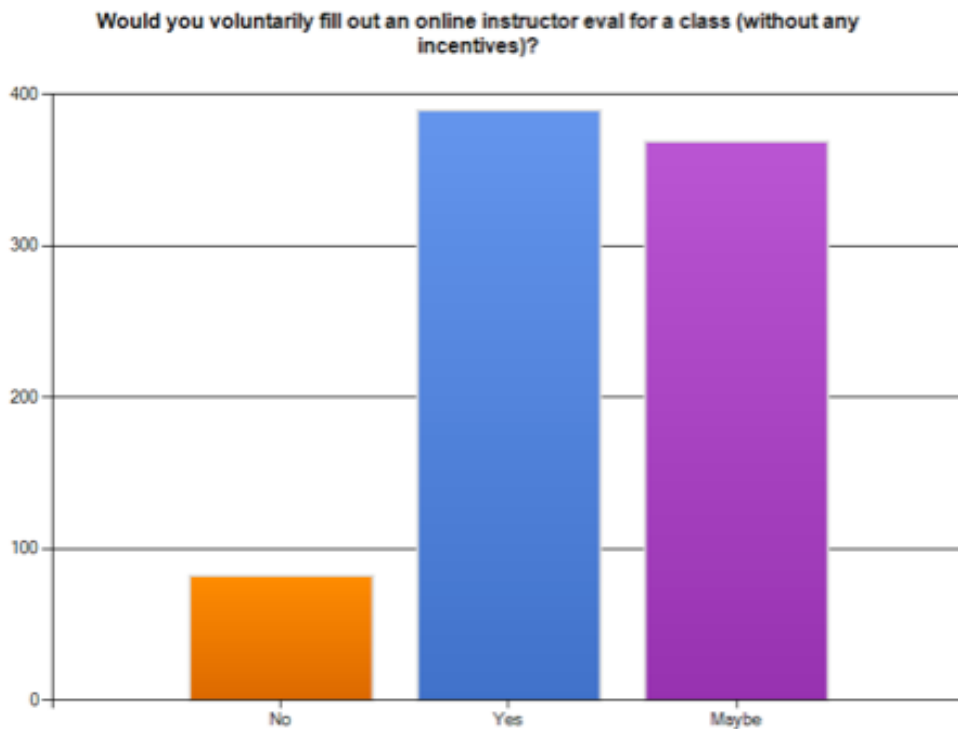


Where would you prefer to fill out your instructor evals?



Student Feedback

- Examples of student responses for WHY they would prefer online evaluations:
 - "Easier, can take time to write comments."
 - "Saves time and resources."
 - "I feel I do not have enough time in class to complete a thorough eval."
 - "paperless = eco-friendly"
 - "Faster, convenient, I already do everything else online."
 - "Extra time could be spent reviewing for the final."



Professor Feedback

- Out of seven department heads who responded to our email, ALL seven were supportive of an online transition
 - Customizable evaluation forms
 - Saved class time
- Some mentioned that incentives should be a necessary component of the new system
 - Others disagreed

Possible Incentives

Based on examples from the literature and the experiences of other schools.

- Grades released earlier (Stanford University, Boston College)
- Email reminders (UCLA Law School, Eastern University, Boston College, University of Michigan)
- Student access to course statistics (Northwestern University)
- Entrance into a raffle for prizes (UCLA Law School, University of Nebraska-Lincoln)
- Requiring students to complete evaluations to receive credit (sometimes by-law complications) (UCLA's Geffen School of Medicine)
- Very minimal grade increase (e.g. $\frac{1}{4}$ of a percent)
- A 'thank you' email

Pros of Online Evaluation Systems

- Reduction in Processing Time
 - Based on information from one school, processing of a single class took 6-8 weeks. With an online system, results could be processed as soon as results are collected.
- Opportunity for Data Analysis
 - Currently evaluation data are not maintained digitally and so are not available for analysis.
- Better Student Anonymity, Less Opportunity for Tampering
 - Less potential for identification of students by handwriting.
 - Eliminates the need for handling of evaluations by multiple staff members.

Pros of Online Evaluation Systems

- More Student Comments
 - Example: at Northwestern University, three times as many students made comments using the online system.
- Increased Convenience for Students
 - Students are able to complete evaluations at a time that is convenient for them, without the time constraints often present in the traditional in-class system.
- More Environmentally Friendly
- Future cost reductions
 - Cost comparison for BYU: paper evaluations cost \$1.09/eval, online evaluations cost \$0.47/eval.
- Greater Customizability of Evaluation Questions

Cons of Online Evaluation Systems

- Lower Response Rates
 - University of Michigan reported a difference of about 10% between online and in class responses, BYU and Northwestern both reported about 20%.
- Technical Problems
 - At one university, infrastructure outage interfered with the collection of evaluations two days before the end of the data collection period.
- Dependent on Students to Complete on Own Time
 - A lack of voluntary participation can be rectified through the use of incentives.