

Date: 2013-04-10

To: Karen Roche, Secretary of Senate

From: Jane Nicholas, Chair of Senate Teaching and Learning Committee

Subject: Report of the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning to Senate

The Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning has three items to report this month in relation to the three motions appearing on the Senate agenda for 19 April 2013. Part A is on student evaluation of teaching, Part B is the proposed transition plan related to online data collection of student evaluation of teaching, and Part C is on a proposed regulation on timely feedback.

Part A: Student Evaluation of Teaching

Further to the report last month on online student evaluation of teaching and the subsequent discussion in Senate, the committee has revised the motion to include an opt-out for faculty members who wish to continue to use paper-based evaluations.

The use of an online data collection process for SET with the option for individual faculty members to continue with paper-based SET has been implemented at other Ontario universities.

In light of the feedback on the motion, the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning has also prepared answers to frequently asked questions, which can be found below. (A full list of references can be found under my signature at the end of the report.)

1. Why should I consider online data collection for student evaluation of teaching at Lakehead University?

Student evaluation of teaching (SET) is one component in the overall assessment of teaching and learning. The Policy on Student Evaluation of Teaching at Lakehead University acknowledges that “teaching is a complex and multidimensional activity, and consequently a student evaluation of teaching should neither be seen nor used as the sole assessment of teaching and pedagogical practice.” The full breadth of teaching can only be evaluated by multiple means, including self-evaluation and faculty-requested peer evaluation. Lakehead University’s Instructional Development Centre is an on-campus resource for faculty to assist with the production of a teaching dossier or with interpreting and contextualizing feedback on teaching.

While SET cannot capture the full complexities of teaching, they do provide students with the opportunity to confidentially provide feedback on course instruction. SET is used by almost every University in Ontario and across the country to capture some aspects of the student experience. In summarizing the literature on faculty perceptions of SET, Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf (2008) write, “student course evaluations have been established as a source of anxiety for faculty.” The anxiety is in part due to the use of the data in promotion, tenure, and renewal as well as merit decisions. As with any data, the results must be interpreted carefully with the limitations carefully taken into account.

The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee is proposing a motion to change the means by which this data is collected. The Senate Policy on Student Evaluation of Teaching at Lakehead University will continue to govern all aspects of SET. No changes are being proposed to the use of SET as addressed by the Collective Agreement.

Online SET will substantially streamline the process for collecting the data, will provide more representative data and will ensure a more secure and confidential collection process. They will allow faculty members more immediate access to the data. An online system would also allow for students to be provided with a standard explanation of the purpose of the evaluations and the subsequent use of the data collected. Overall, online student evaluations of teaching have been reported to have significant benefits, including:

- increased security of data
- more representative data
- increased quality and quantity of comments
- increased anonymity for students
- increased accessibility for students
- more timely feedback to faculty members
- decreased costs
- potential to customize survey instrument

2. What is the current system for collecting the data?

Lakehead University’s current process is exclusively comprised of paper course evaluations that are distributed to faculty members to be distributed to students and completed in class. Annually, our response rate hovers at approximately 50-55%. Response rates using the current paper-based evaluations for courses that are delivered online by Lakehead University have a much lower response rate of approximately 9%. For on-campus classes, the data gathered depends entirely on the students present in the class on a given day. Students are often responsible for the return of completed evaluations, which may be returned to the appropriate Dean’s office, the department’s administrative assistant, or Security. Evaluations completed in Orillia get shipped to the Thunder Bay campus for scanning and then returned to faculty members in Orillia. In short, for all faculty members the completed evaluations pass physically through a number of hands before scanning. Once the Technology Service Centre (TSC) receives the completed forms, staff hand-feed each evaluation into a Scantron machine. The process consumes a significant amount of time and resources and in the scanning process alone there is a 10% margin

of error. The course evaluations, including the students' hand-written comments, along with summary scores are typically returned to faculty members between eight and twelve weeks after they are completed by students. The summative data is stored online on an internal server for an indefinite period.

3. Is there a lower response rate for online course evaluations?

Response rates for online surveys vary significantly in the research, but typically range from 30% to 60% (for an overview of the literature see Rawn, 2008). When compared with traditional paper-based evaluations, however, response rates do tend to be lower (Avery et al, 2006; Dommeyer et al, 2002; Hardy 2003), although there have been studies which reported no to little difference (Leung and Kember, 2005; Hakstian 2008) or higher response rates online (Liegel and McDonald, 2005). Rawn notes, however, that the vast majority of data on online surveys was collected in the 1990s and early 2000s and limited computer and internet access may have influenced the data.

Studies have shown that online evaluations can provide better qualitative data for instructors. Evaluations conducted online do not use class time and allow students to reflect for a greater length of time on their experience within the course (Ernst, 2006). Some studies have often shown that there is increased quality and quantity of detailed comments as well as more thoughtful comments (Anderson, Bird, and Cain, 2005, Donovan et al, 2006), although Stowell, Addison, and Smith (2012) did not find an increase in quantity in their study.

Lower rates do not necessarily mean less representative data. Nulty (2008) notes that “whether or not a response rate is adequate depends (in part) on the use that is being made of the data.”

McGill University has established acceptable response rates for online SET included in a table below:

Class Size	Acceptable Response Rate (%)
5-11	100-45
12-30	40%
31-100	35%
101-200	30%
201-1000	25%

Nulty (2008) has developed recommended response rates under different conditions. His table is included below:

	Liberal Conditions		Stringent Conditions	
	(10% sampling error; 80% confidence level; 70:30 split responses 4 or 5 compared with 1,2,3)		(3% sample error; 95% confidence level; 70:30 split responses 4 or 5 compared with 1,2,3)	
Total No. of students in the course	Required no of respondents	Response rate required (%)	Required no. of respondents	Response rate required (%)
10	7	75	10	100
20	12	58	19	97
30	14	48	29	96
40	16	40	38	95
50	17	35	47	93
60	18	31	55	92
70	19	28	64	91
80	20	25	72	90
90	21	23	80	88
100	21	21	87	87
150	23	15	123	82
200	23	12	155	77
250	24	10	183	73
300	24	8	209	70
500	25	5	289	58

Rawn (2008) developed a table condensing Nulty's recommended response rates under liberal conditions and comparing them to the McGill rates.

Class Size	McGill (%)	Nulty (2008) (%)
5-11	min. 5 responses	at least 75%
12-30	at least 40%	74-48%
31-100	at least 35%	47-21%
101-200	at least 30%	20-12%
201-1000	at least 25%	11-3%

4. How can we maximize the response rates?

Research suggests that reminders by faculty, ensuring convenient access to the survey, and promoting the value of student evaluation of teaching all improve response rates. Moving to online SET would require a convenient system offered through 'myinfo' with email reminders being sent to students and faculty before evaluations begin and until they close (Nulty 2008). Cook, Heath and Thompson (2008) recommend 3 contacts to maximize response rates. Faculty members could also remind students of the availability of the evaluation, how the data is subsequently used, and its significance (Murphy 2004; Porter 2004). Johnson (2003) and Tucker et al (2008) show that when students believe that evaluating teaching is an important task response rates can substantially improve. Students would also need to be assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Overall, employing good communication strategies would help to maximize online response rates.

Research on incentives (e.g. lotteries for prizes) (Dommeyer et al, 2004; Umbach 2004; Anderson, Cain and Bird, 2005) have significant discrepancies in their effectiveness in increasing response rates, and Ballantyne (2003) has questioned the ethical use of grade incentives. The Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning is of the opinion that communicating the intrinsic value of student evaluation of teaching is a better strategy than providing extrinsic rewards or disincentives. The Committee expressed concern that disincentives might unfairly bias results for instructors.

Lakehead University students are currently surveyed online through CUSC, NSSE, and for program reviews and all have acceptable response rates according to the McGill rates, with response rates for CUSC and NSSE being very good.

To maximize response rates of SET the committee recommends:

- Easy access to the survey offered through myinfo
- Assurances of student confidentiality
- Faculty reminders of the availability of the survey and the significance of the data collected
- Three email reminders (one before the survey is available and two during the period of availability)
- A standard explanation of how the data is used and who has access to it
- A campus-wide(Thunder Bay and Orillia) promotional campaign

5. Do online SET have unrepresentative samples because only students with extreme views will take the time to respond?

Numerous studies have not found this to be the case (Winder and Sehgal 2006; Avery et al 2006; Dommeyer et al 2004; Anderson, Cain and Bird, 2005; Ardalan, et al 2007; Donovan et al 2006). Winer and Sehgal 2006 concluded that there was “no systemic bias between the paper-based and online course evaluations. That is, there were no systematic differences in the means and distributions of the results.” More recently, Stowell, Addison, and Smith (2012) also found that there were no differences in the valence (positive, negative, neutral) in the students’ comments, although they also did not see an increase in the quantity of student comments as other studies have noted (Anderson, Cain, and Bird 2005 and Ardalan et al 2007). One study, however, found that of 13 questions on the survey 4 questions had a significant difference in mean score (greater than 0.10) with online surveys having the higher score (Avery et al, 2006).

6. Is the online storage of the data secure?

Currently, the results from paper-based SET at Lakehead University are stored online after being manually entered. The Senate- approved Policy on Student Evaluation of Teaching at Lakehead University and the Collective Agreement govern who has access to the data. Section 3.4 of the Policy on Student Evaluation of Teaching at Lakehead University states: “The transmission and storage of the survey data will be undertaken in a manner to protect the confidentiality of the instructors’ results. Individual course results, and specific student feedback, shall be given only to the instructor concerned, except in the case where the instructor has agreed to make his/her course evaluations public.” Section 16.06.02 (B) of the current collective agreement requires faculty members to provide an agreed upon sub-set of summary scores as part of their annual report. With an online data collection process, faculty members would still need to print out and report their summary scores for the sub-set of questions to the Dean with their Annual Report.

Lakehead University’s security controls are annually audited by an external firm to ensure the security of and confidence in the online storage of data. Moving to delivering surveys online would change the collection of the data but not the storage of it, with the exception of the student comments. To further alleviate concerns regarding the care and custody of the data, the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning proposes that Senate annually elect an internal auditor to report on the security of the data storage of SET.

Part B: Proposed Transition Plan for moving to online data collection for student evaluation of teaching

Phase 1: Existing survey instrument made available online through myinfo for 2013 spring/summer courses. This would mean that SET would now be conducted for spring/summer courses.

Phase 2: Existing survey instrument made available online through myinfo for all 2013-2014 courses

Phase 3: In 2014-2015, Senate Teaching and Learning is to evaluate online SET and consider the development of a bank of approved questions for instructors to customize survey instrument.

Part C: Proposed Regulation on Timely Feedback

In October 2006, Senate approved a guideline on providing timely feedback to students that has been in effect since 2007. In the October 2006 Report to Senate from the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning it was noted that “Lakehead University is committed to offering a student-centred environment conducive to effective teaching and learning. Part of that commitment requires effective communication between faculty and students in terms of how each student is progressing in a course, and in a program.”

Now, in consultation with the Registrar’s Office, the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning is recommending that the following proposed regulation be referred to the Senate Academic Committee. In drafting the regulation the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee wanted to ensure that students would receive adequate and timely feedback on their academic progress, so they can make informed academic decisions. This principle guided the recommended percentages and dates found in the regulation. However, the Committee strongly believes in promoting student responsibility, and so drafted the regulation so that the feedback should be *available* to students. The Committee also recognizes that this regulation may not be applicable to all courses and has included a means for providing exceptions.

Rationale:

Lakehead University is committed to making appropriate and timely feedback available to students on their work.

Proposed Regulation

“For one term courses, graded feedback worth at least 10% of the final grade should be available to students five working days prior to the last day to withdraw without academic penalty; for two term (full year) courses 30% of the final grade should be available to students five working days prior to the last date to add classes for the winter term. Exceptions must be approved by the Dean of the Faculty.”

Note:

The spirit of this regulation should be followed during the spring and summer terms. In particular, all instructors are urged to include academic work that is assigned, evaluated, and returned at least two working days prior to the last day to withdraw without academic penalty from the spring or summer course.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Moved that the procedures for administering the existing instrument for student evaluation of teaching be conducted online through the Lakehead University website using myinfo with faculty members having the option to continue to use paper-based evaluations by annually opting out of the online system.

Moved that the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee's proposed Transition Plan be accepted.

Moved that the proposed regulation on timely feedback be referred to the Senate Academic Committee.

Respectfully submitted,
Jane Nicholas

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