



Offering Time During Class for Students to Complete Web-based Student Ratings of Instruction Improves Response Rate

Karen Young, Jeffrey Joines, Trey Standish & Victoria Gallagher (2019) Student evaluations of teaching: the impact of faculty procedures on response rates, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44:1, 37-49, DOI: [10.1080/02602938.2018.1467878](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1467878)

In "Student Evaluations of Teaching: The Impact of Faculty Procedures on Response Rates," Karen Young, Jeffrey Joines, Trey Standish, and Victoria Gallagher report on an intervention that increases response rates to web-based student ratings of instruction (SRI). In their review of the literature, the authors argued that low response rates, an inherent problem of online surveys, can create non-response bias, especially when responders differ in important ways from non-responders. Nonetheless, many higher-education institutions have transitioned from traditional paper-and-pencil administration to web-based delivery in order to standardize administration procedures and, thereby, enhance the validity of SRI for summative decisions. Young et al.'s study demonstrates that response rates to online SRI can be significantly improved through a combination of reminding students about the course evaluation and allowing time during class to complete the ratings.

The authors begin by reviewing the literature on studies that investigated factors that influence response rates. They reported that students are more likely to respond to end-of-course online SRI if they a) feel engaged with the class or instructor, b) are enrolled in a class in their major, c) receive social-norm appeals to complete the ratings, d) provide mid-semester formative feedback that leads to improvements in the course, e) are shown how feedback has led to course improvements in the past, f) receive e-mail or discussion board reminders, and g) are given grade incentives. Although grade incentives have the strongest positive impact on response rate, the authors discouraged their use because they are ethically questionable and they increase grade inflation.

After examining several theoretical explanations for student low response rates, the authors then isolated three primary factors. Students are less likely to respond if a) the course is not in their major, b) the ratings must be completed outside of the regular class time, and (c) they believe the results of the SRI are not taken seriously and used in a meaningful way. They, therefore, hypothesized that response rates would be higher for

course sections in which students could complete the SRI during class time compared to when they could not. They also predicted that including a statement in the course syllabus that communicates the importance of SRI would also increase response rate.

For their study, the authors recruited 53 tenured faculty at a single institution who together taught 73 undergraduate classes with enrollments of 5 to 100 students. Instructors inserted into their course syllabus a scheduled date for administering the SRI. They also reminded students on multiple occasions to bring a mobile device to class on the day of the evaluation, and they assured them the survey would be confidential and voluntary. On the day of the scheduled SRI, respective faculty left their classrooms during the 20 minutes students were given to complete the online survey.

The results of this within-subjects design revealed that the average response rate in the Fall 2012 semester for these 73 classes was 44.2%. As a result of the intervention, it jumped to 73.2% in Fall 2013, a statistical and practical difference of 29%. In 2012, 13% of the 73 sections had response rates of 60% or higher; in 2013, it was 76%. However, the authors identified two possible confounds. First, it is possible that average class sizes varied across the two semesters. But, a check on this revealed no significant difference. Second, changes made to university online software could have accounted for the difference. Therefore, they selected a control group made up of comparable courses and faculty in other academic units (i.e., tenured faculty teaching the same undergraduate courses in Fall 2012 and Fall 2013 with enrollments between 5 and 100). For this group the response rates in 2012 and 2013 were 41.9% and 43.6%, a nonsignificant 2.2% difference. The impact of the 73 sections in Fall 2013 offering in-class time resulted, therefore, in about a 27% increase in response rate over and above the control group.

In conclusion, the combination of reminding students about SRI on multiple occasions and offering time in class to complete the ratings is a relatively simple and effective way to significantly and meaningfully increase response rates. Although the study's design prevented isolating the independent contributions of these two interventions, in combination they made a difference.