

Initial report of ad-hoc committee on teaching evaluations

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Committee members

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Committee charge

Studying and recommending actions for increasing the completion rate of student surveys of teaching.

Summary of work so far

Committee members met twice in September. They gathered data and background information about student surveys of teaching and identified additional steps they plan to take over the coming months before issuing a final report. This document provides background about student surveys of teaching at KU, offers potential solutions for improving student participation in surveys, identifies problems the committee has identified in the process, and explains further actions the committee plans to take.

Easiest solution to the problem

The fastest and easiest way to improve participation would be to have students complete the surveys in class. Instructors did this for many years with paper forms, moving away from in-class administration only after online surveys began. That was a necessity in the first three years of online surveys because students had to fill out the forms on Blackboard. The only way to do that was with a laptop or desktop computer. Online surveys are now handled through a system called Explorance Blue, which adapts easily to smartphones, tablets or computers.

Background

Some history helps put the committee's work in context.

[In 2007](#), a Faculty Senate task force revised the form for student surveys of teaching, doing away with generic questions and focusing on such elements as clarity of course objectives and whether the instructor was clear, organized and respectful. That form was first used in 2008, although departments were still free to create their own evaluation forms.

In 2014, the Center for Online and Distance Learning began offering online evaluations, first for online classes and then for in-person classes. It used Blackboard for those evaluations until 2017, when it adopted a system called Explorance Blue. The new system provides much more flexibility in the way surveys can be taken (computers, phones, tablets) and makes the surveys much easier to administer and analyze. The online evaluation system also saves hundreds of hours of staff time each year. For example, Ally Smith, an administrative assistant in environmental studies, geology, geography, and atmospheric sciences, estimates that staff time needed to prepare data and distribute results for those four units has dropped from 51.5 hours with paper surveys to 4 hours with online surveys.

In 2015, Student Senate issued a report calling for all student surveys of teaching to be moved online, for the surveys to include additional questions, and for the results to be made available to students. No action was taken on that report.

Potential ways to improve student participation

When student surveys of teaching move online, instructors generally approach them differently. Rather than administering the surveys in class as they do with the paper version, they rely on email messages or oral announcements to remind students to complete the surveys on their own time. So it's no surprise that participation rates drop. That has been a common occurrence when universities move student surveys of teaching online (Nulty, 2008). How much participation rates at KU have fallen has been impossible to determine because the committee has been unable to acquire department-by-department data. (See the Problems section below.) That means that committee members have had to work from an assumption of widespread declines. Given that, the committee offers these preliminary recommendations:

- **Complete evaluations in class.** Returning the surveys to class would take some planning. A vast majority of students have smartphones or another electronic device they could use in class, especially if they had notice about an evaluation day. Instructors would need to make sure students who do not have a device could still complete the evaluations, though. They could make laptops or tablets available for student use during the evaluation period or ask students to partner with classmates and share their devices so that everyone has a way to access the surveys. If that didn't work, students could still complete the surveys outside class.
- **Post an announcement on Blackboard.** A prominent announcement on Blackboard each semester might spur more students to take action.
- **Make grades available earlier for those who complete evaluations.** This could create an incentive for student to complete the evaluations. It would also require an additional administrative step.
- **Make surveys available earlier.** The last two weeks of class are generally hectic for students and instructors. Making the surveys of teaching available a week or two earlier might improve participation rates.

Problems in the current process

The committee sees several problems with the evaluation process that hinder participation and diminish the validity of student surveys of teaching.

- **Decentralization and lack of consistency.** The evaluation process is decentralized and lacks coordination. The vice provost for faculty development sends a reminder about the student surveys of teaching each semester, but the surveys are handled by schools and departments, each of which has its own procedures and sometimes its own questions. Some departments solicit student comments and some don't, even though faculty members say the comments are often the most useful component of the surveys. That approach has created a hodgepodge of evaluation methods and a system with seemingly little oversight. For instance, the committee could find no one at the university level who oversees the process or who could provide university-wide data about the student surveys (see below).
- **Lack of data.** The committee had only limited success in gathering university data about participation rates in student surveys of teaching. The Center for Online and Distance Learning was especially helpful, providing data about online evaluations for the past four years. That represents only a portion of evaluations university-wide, though. Data about paper surveys apparently goes through the Office of Institutional Research

and Planning. The vice provost for faculty development asked for that data on the committee's behalf but was told that gathering it would require a special algorithm to be written, something that the office had little interest in doing.

- **Perceived lack of value.** Many faculty members and students have low opinions of the end-of-semester surveys of teaching. Students don't have access to the class-by-class data – something they have sought repeatedly – and so don't see the process as benefiting them. The questions on the surveys provide little relevant feedback for instructors, most of whom recognize the many biases in the evaluation process. The common name for the surveys – “evaluations of teaching” – exacerbates a lack of trust. The surveys allow students to provide feedback on classes and instructors, something that is important, but they provide little in the way of meaningful evaluation. That general lack of enthusiasm is one element of low response rates.
 - **Multiple surveys.** Students in lab courses are often asked to complete multiple evaluation forms for the same class. That creates confusion and can lead students to ignore some evaluations altogether.
- **Biases in evaluations.** Research over the past two decades has shown multiple biases in student surveys of teaching, making them an unreliable source for gauging teaching effectiveness. That plays a large role in instructors' lack of enthusiasm for the evaluations. Additionally, a recent meta-analysis of research into student surveys (Uttl et al., 2016) found no relationship between scores on course surveys and student learning.
 - **Fairness to instructors.** Many instructors teach courses that someone else has created, and they have little control over course content. That makes them vulnerable to negative reactions from students who dislike the course content or the course structure.
 - **Fairness to GTAs.** Graduate teaching assistants and lab coordinators are evaluated in the same way as instructors, even though their duties and responsibilities are usually quite different.
- **Overuse of evaluations for P&T.** The committee certainly wants to see improved response rates for student surveys of teaching but also sees a need to minimize their use in the evaluation of instructors. The simplicity of the surveys has inflated their importance, with many departments using them as the primary tool for determining teaching effectiveness. They require little effort from faculty members or administrators and generate scores that seemingly allow comparison across a department. University guidelines call for multiple forms of evidence for evaluating teaching, but many, if not most, departments ignore those guidelines and use mean scores from student surveys of teaching combined with cursory class visits by peers. The College is implementing a more thorough evaluation process, and the Center for Teaching Excellence is piloting a rubric system that takes multiple forms of evidence into account in making judgments about teaching effectiveness. Those approaches show promise in making the evaluation process fairer and more meaningful while maintaining the student voice.

What the committee plans to do

- **Create a clearer picture of the evaluation process.** Because the process is so decentralized, the committee want to get a better sense of how student surveys are administered, what formats the surveys are in, and what questions are being asked.
- **Evaluate data from CODL.** Aggregate response rates mask the many variations among departments and individual courses. The data from CODL will provide a better sense of which departments and courses have the highest and lowest response rates. We can then speak with instructors and departments that have higher rates to see how they are approaching the student surveys of teaching.

- **Evaluate literature.** The committee plans to do a broad literature search and look for ideas and potential solutions that other universities have found.
- **Survey students.** The committee plans to survey students to get a better sense of why they do or don't complete end-of-semester surveys of teaching. We may also organize focus groups of students.