Tech Snacks: Informal Course Evaluations

Every semester, students are asked to fill out the course evaluation surveys administered by the Provost's office. But what if you have a low student response rate or the survey questions are too generic to yield helpful input for your course? There are a number of tools, strategies, and questions you can use to gather course feedback from students.

Survey Tools

There are many different tools you can use to create your own surveys and make them anonymous. Below are some options and the pros and cons of using each.

Brightspace Survey Tool

Brightspace has a Survey tool under the "Activities" tab. The setup of surveys is very similar to the setup of quizzes in Brightspace, including the same types of questions.

Pros: You can make surveys anonymous, which can encourage students to be honest.

➔ *Note: once you check the anonymous box, you can not uncheck it.*

Cons: When surveys are anonymous, you can't see who hasn't taken the survey. Surveys can't be graded or linked to the Brightspace gradebook.

Microsoft Forms

Faculty and staff can access Microsoft Forms through their O365 account. Microsoft Forms is almost identical to Google Forms, with a few additional features.

Pros: multiple question formats, basic branching, basic analytics, export responses to .xls file, multiple distribution methods (link, QR, SSO), option to require MSUN sign-in, compatible with PowerAutomate workflows

Cons: not as many features or customizability as Qualtrics

Qualtrics

Faculty and staff have access to the Qualtrics survey tool on the library's website.

Pros: multiple question formats, complex branching, sophisticated analytics and reporting tools, multiple distribution methods (link, QR code, SMS), built-in workflows (actions that can be triggered by response events), file collection capabilities, customizable code

Cons: fairly user-friendly but may be too complicated for beginners

Pencil and Paper

Sometimes the old fashioned way is all you need.

Pros: easy, quick, can easily be built into your class period

Cons: anonymity is somewhat compromised if you know your students' handwriting

Framing Course Evaluations

Effective course evaluation questions inquire about instructors, course content, and self-reflection of student performance. It's common in course evaluation surveys to phrase questions as statements with an accompanying likert scale (e.g., strongly agree to strongly disagree). If you want to be more specific, you can also ask students to fill out a short, written response and get more in-depth feedback.

Determine why you are collecting feedback

In most cases, the main goal is to collect data that will ultimately help you make improvements to your teaching strategies or curriculum. Ideally, the data you gather should guide your reflection and decision-making about teaching/course changes so that you can make an action plan for improvement.

However, the scope of the questions may change depending on your goals. For instance:

- Is there a specific part of your course you want to know was effective?
- Did you add a new element to your course and want to know if it was useful?
- Was there a particularly difficult section of your course that you are unsure about?

Determine the best timing for your survey

Shortly after the course begins? Monthly? Mid-semester? End of semester? After a specific project?

Determine what kind of feedback will be useful & actionable

Before writing your questions, consider what type of student feedback you are looking for.

Instructor-specific questions
These questions might evaluate the instructor's preparedness, presentation of content, clarity of expectations and directions, feedback on assignments and performance, availability/approachability, and facilitation of inclusion and equity.
Course-specific questions
These questions might include general inquiries about the course itself. Students can evaluate the organization of content, overall course flow/structure, and skill development & application.
Student self-evaluation questions
These questions allow students to measure their own performance in the course, therefore assessing the credibility of the survey taker. Students can reflect on how many classes they attended, whether they completed all of the assigned reading, and how many hours per week they spent studying the material.
Open-ended questions
These questions allow students to elaborate on their evaluations or express concerns not addressed in other questions.

Determine survey questions (examples below)

A comprehensive list of suggested categories and questions is provided by the Berkeley Center of Teaching and Learning.

The "Student Feedback" section (below) from the University of Colorado Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning provides guidance for short monthly check-ins, mid-semester check-ins, and summative evaluations.

Bates College offers an example mid-semester survey for instructors to use.