FAQs about Response Rates and Bias in Online Course Evaluations

Are the course ratings lower when evaluations are done online rather than in class?
- There was no systematic tendency for course ratings to be either higher or lower with online data collection at any of the institutions studied. (See Reference List that follows.)

Are response rates lower for online evaluations than for in-class evaluations?
- At all five institutions where most research has been conducted, response rates are lower when course evaluations are completed online as compared to in class.
- In-class response rates are typically between 60% and 80%.

Are course ratings biased because only the students who don’t like a course respond online?
- At all universities, including McGill, there was no bias due to the method of data collection. In other words, students with a range of opinions about a course complete the evaluations. There were no differences in the average ratings or their distributions between online and in-class evaluations.

Why not stay with in-class evaluations to get a higher response rate?
- Although in-class response rates are higher, good response rates alone do not ensure the validity of the results. In general, lower response rates do not necessarily result in less representative responses.

What are the advantages of an online system?
- Enhanced data analysis and communication
  - rapid turnaround time for professors to get results; hours vs. months after submitting grades
  - standardized reporting functions available within units and University-wide
  - supports custom analyses
  - facilitates dissemination of results
  - provides secure archiving
- An online system offers every student equal access to the evaluation process
  - every student enrolled in the course has a voice; missing one class does not silence a student
- Improved administrative efficiencies
  - easy to standardize and customize forms
  - reduced workload for administrative staff in the academic units
  - lower costs
- Improved data quality
  - increased quantity and quality of comments
  - increased anonymity for students
- Reduced environmental impact
  - reduces paper consumption by eliminating paper questionnaires, computer response sheets and reports to professors, unit heads, and students
Reference List

McGill University

- Analyzed data from 93 courses in 4 departments from 2005 and 2003/2004
- Looked at instances when the same instructor taught the same course and compared online evaluations (2005) and in-class paper evaluations (either 2003 or 2004)
- There was no significant difference on the mean rating, shape of distribution or standard deviation for any of the courses.
- There was no systematic increase or decrease in the confidence intervals of the means.
- There was no systematic tendency for results to be either higher or lower with online data collection.


Brigham Young University

- 74 course sections evaluated both online and paper; there was no evidence that lower response rates resulted in lower ratings.
- Online ratings appear to be less susceptible to response rate bias


Cornell University

- Study in the Department of Economics; sample of 7 professors who each taught the same course over a three year period (total of 29 evaluations); in two cases the course was taught twice in the same semester, evaluated once online and once in-class.
- The online response rates were lower but they did not affect the average evaluation scores.


CSU, Northridge

- 16 instructors teaching the same course twice per semester; one evaluated online, the other in-class
- There was no overall effect for data collection method; when separate analyses were performed, there was a difference for only one instructor.
- Modest grade incentive (0.25%) did have an impact on response rate without influencing results.


Unnamed southeastern university.

- Data from 66 courses from 5 disciplinary areas that were randomly assigned to online or paper.
- There was no effect for the method of data collection, nor was there any interaction between the method and the disciplinary area.


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