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New online course evaluation tool saves departments time, money

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The University of Iowa College of Engineering has operated its course evaluations online for about 15 years.

But, when the person who managed the course evaluation survey software decided to retire last year, administrators knew it was time to find a commercial solution.

And when Keri Hornbuckle, professor and associate dean of academic programs for the College of Engineering, heard about a TIER initiative aimed at rolling out a new online course-evaluation tool across campus, she thought her college would make an excellent pilot.

"This project created an opportunity for us to solve the problem," Hornbuckle says. "We didn't have a person lined up to take on this big task for our college, and we certainly didn't want to go back to paper course evaluations in the interim."

The Application Portfolio Management Project aims to consolidate the university's application portfolio by identifying business needs and priorities and eliminating redundancy. A large part of the project, which is one of the 16 OneIT@Iowa initiatives, is devoted to getting departments and colleges across campus to adopt a streamlined course-evaluation system called ACE Online.

ACE Online, or "Assessing the Classroom Environment," allows students to complete course-evaluation forms on any computer or mobile device, as opposed to a printed course-evaluation form.

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In addition to eliminating paper waste and expense, ACE Online is customizable, which makes changing questions easy for faculty. Its digital nature also provides immediate results that allow faculty to see how many students are responding in real time. The tool is forecast to save the university $350,000.

"Our faculty had long discussed what questions to ask and how the surveys were to be handled," Hornbuckle says. "We had a protocol for who had access to the results and how and when the evaluations were to be administered, and ITS worked closely with us to make sure the new system would be consistent with the policies we had already agreed upon."

Throughout the process, Hornbuckle says she worked closely with IT support consultant Aaron Elam to develop a questionnaire that was completely consistent with what engineering faculty had agreed would be on the evaluation.

After a pilot in spring 2015, the College of Engineering implemented the ACE Online tool for all faculty.

"It went really well. We learned a lot and used it again in our summer courses, and now we are in the process of helping faculty understand how to incentivize it, so there's been a lot of discussion about best practices for encouraging students to complete the survey," Hornbuckle says.

Annette Beck, director of Enterprise Instructional Technology and Evaluation and Exam Service for the ITS Office of Teaching, Learning, and Technology, says the tool provides the university with a reporting function that brings the whole institution together.

"The surveys and reporting features allow us to archive data and see trends over several years, so we can help faculty see where they're doing well and where they need guidance," says Beck, who also serves on the project team. "We couldn't do this kind of analysis with our old system."

Beck says almost all other colleges are moving to ACE Online by the end of the academic year. Most of the savings are in staff time in the colleges, which allows employees to work on things they didn't have time to do before.

Overall, Hornbuckle says, the project has provided the College of Engineering with a product that better fits its needs.

"TIER allowed us to move from an old, antiquated product to a new method for online evaluation of our courses that's higher quality and more responsive to the needs of our faculty and students."

SOME SORT of QUESTIONS and ANSWERS

Why are we moving the paper-based course evaluations online?
The change fulfills a longtime desire of faculty, staff, and students to move paper-based end-of-semester course evaluations online for efficiency and convenience.
It is estimated to save $350,000 per year. Some savings are in technology—no longer needing to maintain outdated software used with the paper process—and in paper costs. Most will be in staff time—hours the colleges previously invested in planning, distributing, and collecting evaluations.
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In addition to significantly less legwork for staff, ACE (Assessing the Classroom Environment) Online allows students to complete the evaluations at a time and place that works for them-on a mobile device in class, at home, or in a computer lab. Faculty will benefit from easy, online access to the data from their current and future course evaluations.

Where can instructors and students access ACE Online?
There are links in ICON (under Student Tools), and in the Iowa Student Information System.

What are some ways that instructors can encourage students to participate in the evaluation period?

The best way to get students to participate is to give them time in class. This is not different between paper-based or online versions. Other ways faculty may increase their response rates:

➢ Let students know you don't see the results until after final grades are submitted
➢ Reiterate how important both positive and negative feedback are to you in improving the course for the next set of students
➢ Show students how to access the online version
➢ Add self-designed questions (qualitative) to make sure students can share other feedback besides multiple choice
➢ Create a culture of feedback in your class
➢ Thank the students

Who has access to the completed evaluations?
Each college is slightly different in regard to access privileges. All instructors can access their own evaluations after final grades are submitted. No one other than the instructor has rights unless a dean or associate dean requests access for others. Examples may include department chairpersons, course coordinators, and administrative support staff that are helping implement the evaluations.

For more information: http://teach.its.uiowa.edu/technology-tools/course-evaluations/ace-online
Project: Application Portfolio Management
Source http://tier.uiowa.edu/new-online-course-evaluation-tool-saves-departments-time-money
Thursday, January 21, 2016. Retrieved on 02.02.2016.