

# Factors Motivating Students to Respond to Online Course Evaluations in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida

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## Abstract

This qualitative study sought to identify motivating factors for students to complete online course evaluations. Researchers of this study did personal interviews with instructors ( $N=7$ ) who had a higher than average response rates for course evaluations. In addition, the researchers held a student focus group ( $N=17$ ) purposively selected for their diverse perspective. Researchers coded the data using the constant comparative method. Themes from instructors included the context surrounding the instructor and student, the course itself, logistical challenges and motivational factors. Themes from students included them asking, "What's in it for me", their willingness to respond if certain conditions were met, logistical challenges, confusion and frustration. Implications for practice include creating a culture of respect and reciprocity, using formative assessment and frequent reminders, developing incentive structures, anticipating logistical challenges, providing in-class time to complete evaluations and helping students find value in the course evaluation process. Recommendations for further research include further exploring student motivations and conducting a similar study for online courses.

## Introduction

Course evaluations are a tool used frequently at institutions of higher education. Their purpose is to gather data that can guide course planning and represent the student perspective. Administrators incorporate course evaluations into evaluation package for annual review, tenure and promotion decisions and salary increases (University of Florida, n.d.). Course evaluations, according to Norris and Conn (2005), "provide one critical source of information for the improvement of course, curriculum and practitioners; pedagogic efforts and their use as a component of faculty review is a well-established tradition in higher education not likely to disappear any time soon" (p. 26).

Recently, the University of Florida transitioned from administering course evaluations for all courses in a face-to-face format using paper and pencil questionnaires to an online format. As of fall 2011, the University of Florida administered all course evaluations online (University of Florida, 2014). Almost immediately after changing to the online delivery, the response rates of course evaluations dropped significantly across the University of Florida. The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CAL S) was no exception. The fall 2010 response rate prior to course evaluations moving completely online was 70.13 %. However, following the migration to online delivery in the fall of 2013, the response rate fell to 45.26 %.

Response rate refers to the proportion of the selected sample that agrees to an interview or returns a completed questionnaire (Ary et al., 2010). Generally, as response rates decrease, the potential for a biased sample increases (Israel, 2009). Nonresponse reduces the sample size and may bias the results (Ary et al., 2010). Some evidence suggests there is no statistical difference between mean scores for course evaluations administered online, even with a lower response rate, than traditional paper and pencil versions with a higher response rate (Avery et al., 2006; Thorpe, 2002). Nevertheless, low response rates, in effect, call into question the validity of results of course evaluations.

Across the nation, universities have worked to motivate students to respond to online course evaluations. Crews and Curtis (2011) promoted using incentives. Other methods included giving reminder messages or using a sweepstakes in which students who responded entered for a chance to win a prize (Dommeyer et al., 2004). Additionally, faculty reminders, assuring students of the use of their responses, providing prizes, assuring students of the anonymity of their responses and familiarizing students with the online environment have also been described (Nulty, 2008). Finally, Norris and Conn (2005) added that faculty should explicitly announce the

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availability and location of the evaluation within a few weeks of the end of the course, explain the value of the course evaluation process and student feedback and remind students to complete the evaluation. Several universities across the nation have implemented many of these tactics with mixed degrees of success.

The University of Florida proactively attempted to address nonresponse by issuing several documents to faculty on how to improve response rates. The evaluations coordinator at the University of Florida promoted tactics such as posting on the class discussion board, emailing the class listserv with the dates and uniform resource locator (URL) for evaluations, as well as e-mailing reminders to students exactly one week before the final date of class or the final exam (Johnson, 2012). Despite these efforts, response rates dropped and currently remain low across the University of Florida as well as CALS.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe factors that motivated students within CALS at the University of Florida to complete, or discouraged them from completing online course evaluations. One specific objective guided this study, which was to understand instructor and student perceptions of motivating factors for students to complete online course evaluations.

Researchers gathered data in two rounds during the spring semester of 2014. First, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with instructors (Ary et al., 2010). Instructors were selected purposively from CALS at the University of Florida based on having a response rate of over 80% on their course evaluations in the 2011-2012 academic year. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. One researcher conducted the interview while the other researcher took notes. Pseudonyms replaced the actual names of participants in this manuscript in order to protect their individual identity. Following the instructor interviews, the researchers conducted one student focus group (Ary et al., 2010). The researchers recruited participants from two large courses within CALS with an effort to maximize diversity within participants based on gender, academic major and cultural diversity. The researchers e-mailed fifteen students inviting them to come on a particular date and time to a central location where the focus group could take place. One researcher conducted the focus group while the other researcher took notes. The focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, the researchers did not record any individual identifiers for focus group participants. The University of Florida Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation in the study.

Triangulation and member checking increased the trustworthiness of this study (Ary et al., 2010). The triangulation employed in this study was a form of structural corroboration that included different sources of data and different methods. Member checking for accuracy was done throughout the interviews as well as focus group. Researchers improved dependability and confirmability through an audit trail in the form of transcripts. The researchers controlled personal bias primarily through reflexivity (Ary et al., 2010).

Researchers analyzed the data from the interviews and focus group using the constant comparative method (Ary et al., 2010). This manuscript contains the themes and subthemes that emerged. The authors divided findings into two sections delineating the perspectives of instructors from those of students.

## Results

The following section details the themes and subthemes for both the instructor and student portions. Additionally, Table 1 offers a summary of themes and subthemes.

**Table 1. Summary of Themes and Subthemes Driving Student Response Rates in Online Course Evaluations Reported by Instructors and Students.**

Instructors		Students	
Theme	Subtheme	Theme	Subtheme
Context	Relational and caring Communicative Promotion and tenure Feedback	What's In It for Me?	Pointlessness RateMyProfessors.com
Motivation	Incentives Reminders Purpose	Response Motivators	Incentives Bipolar feelings Time in class Instructor passion and compassion Formative vs. summative feedback
Logistics	Previous system Time and devices Explanations Participant fatigue	Logistic Challenges	Participant fatigue Low priority Cognitive load
Course	Coursework Dynamic methods	Frustration	Who looks at them? Ambiguous motivators

### Instructor Perspectives

The researchers interviewed seven instructors for this study: two males and five females; two held the rank of full professor, one was a tenured associate professor and four were assistant professors. Instructors indicated four themes that may have affected the response rates to their course evaluations: context, motivation, logistics and course. Each theme had several sub-themes.

### Context

The context surrounding course evaluations with higher than average response rates consisted of three primary factors: the student, the instructor and the course evaluation itself. Subthemes were relational and caring, communicative, promotion and tenure and feedback.

### Relational and Caring

Instructors generally approached their courses from a relational standpoint. They made many attempts to develop rapport with students throughout the semester. They showed they cared about student learning. Richard

said he would work to develop a relationship with all of his students so they would want to complete the evaluation, in part, because of the connection with him.

### Communicative

Instructors set a communicative tone in their classes. Often, this communicative tone led instructors to discuss course evaluations early in the semester.

### Promotion and Tenure

Instructors felt personally motivated to get a good response rate on course evaluation because evaluations are a part of the promotion and tenure package. Some instructors would visit with students about this process and connect the value of the student completing the course evaluation to the instructor personally. Richard stated, "...essentially [this is] going to help me make progress towards tenure."

### Feedback

Instructors expressed value in receiving feedback from students. Most felt feedback was important to making improvements in the course, as well as their own pedagogy. Nearly all instructors used some form of formative feedback that ranged from midterm course evaluation to written student responses on an index card. Instructors highlighted to students how feedback from both formative and summative evaluations had led to changes in the current course. Nancy said, "... I have tweaked some stuff, just based on student feedback ..."

### Motivation

Motivation played a pivotal role in increasing student response rates. Subthemes for motivation included incentives, reminders and purpose.

### Incentives

The topic of incentives surfaced frequently, but with varied use and skepticism of a few. Generally, instructors used either indirect incentives or none at all. Some instructors used indirect extra credit or allowed students to use notes on the final exam as ways to incentivize students to complete the course evaluation. Instructors also harnessed peer pressure by showing the percentage who had responded to the course evaluation in class and students would then pressure each other to respond so that everyone would receive the incentive. Some instructors stopped using incentives, calling into question the quality of feedback received from the incentivized students.

### Reminders

Many instructors reminded their students to take the course evaluation. Most reminded students multiple times and in multiple ways such as through e-mail, in-class, through peers and in casual conversations. "...I'm reminding them. I probably send out 3 or 4 e-mails..." said Vicky. Instructors felt they needed to remind students frequently, as students were often

distracted with other responsibilities at the end of the semester; students with good intentions became forgetful when pushed for time.

### Purpose

Many instructors took time to discuss the value of students taking the course evaluation, what it was used for, how it benefitted the university and the individual faculty member. "*I encourage my students not to just, you know, click the numbers and stuff, but to provide in depth feedback,*" said Nancy. Instructors commented on how ignorant students were about the purpose of course evaluations. Even college juniors and seniors seemed to be unaware of the role course evaluations play in faculty promotion and tenure.

### Logistics

Several issues related to the logistics of administering the course evaluation also emerged. The previous system, explanations and participant fatigue were emergent subthemes associated with this theme.

### Previous System

Some instructors maintained the mentality of the previous paper and pencil evaluation system administered in a face-to-face classroom setting. These instructors would announce to the class to bring their electronic device to class on a particular day in order to take the course evaluation. James said, "*I treat it like the old evaluations and say, we are doing evaluations today. We are going to take about 10-15 minutes, go out of the room and have the T.A. proctor...*" It was, however, equally as common for instructors simply to expect student to take the evaluation on their own time. A few instructors felt access to electronic devices was a barrier for students.

### Explanations

Many instructors explained to students the logistics of completing the course evaluation. This often included explaining the anonymity of responses as well as explaining the value of course evaluations. Nancy would walk students through the procedures of completing the evaluation as well as show them the administrative screen she could see to assure students their comments were anonymous.

### Participant Fatigue

Students received all of the course evaluations at the same time for the courses taken within the current semester. Instructors feared that this might discourage students from doing the evaluations at all. Further, instructors were skeptical about the quality of the feedback students may provide if theirs was, for example, the fifth evaluation the student completed within the same sitting.

### Course

Instructors associated student engagement and willingness to participate in the course evaluation with

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characteristics of the course. Coursework and dynamic methods were two emergent subthemes associated with this theme.

### Coursework

Instructors felt the courses in question were challenging and rigorous. Several instructors commented that theirs was not a course students would take if it were an elective. Instructors commented on the dynamics of the course itself as being challenging and engaging. Concepts of relevancy, rigor and challenge continued to surface with all the instructors as they described their courses.

### Dynamic Methods

Instruction within the courses varied. No instructor used lecture exclusively. Many instructors indicated the tone of their courses were very conversational. Instructors felt this might be important, as students were comfortable with the instructor due to the interactions this varied instructional mode facilitated.

### Student Perspectives

Final participation for the student focus group consisted of seventeen students; four seniors, ten juniors and three sophomores; ten were males and seven female. Twelve students self-identified as pre-professional students. Sentiments from students who participated in the focus group coalesced around four themes that may have affected the response rates to online course evaluations: what's in it for me, response motivators, logistic challenges and frustration. Each theme had several sub-themes.

### What's in It for Me?

Students lacked personal connection to the course evaluation. Generally, students viewed course evaluations as a tool to benefit them in selecting courses or professors. Subthemes associated with this theme were pointlessness and RateMyProfessors.com.

### Pointlessness

Participants felt the course evaluations did not lead to change. The primary evidence they cited was the persistence of poor professors and courses at the university, despite receiving what they were sure were years of poor course evaluations. One focus group participant stated, *"I'm like, clearly the department already knows how bad of a teacher he is, so what am I going to gain by wasting my time to fill out an evaluation about something that everyone already knows."* A few participants also cited the fact that they were graduating, the implication of course being the course evaluation would not directly benefit them or those they knew so they would not go through the effort of completing it.

### RateMyProfessors.com

Participants often referenced the website Rate My Professors (<http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/>). They

found the information from this website useful for selecting a professor as the site included the narrative about the professor, which provided some perceived transparency to the review process. Some participants indicated they preferred the written portion of the course evaluation to the numeric portions of the course evaluation as it provided them the opportunity to vent and to expound. There was a sense of frustration that the narrative portion could not be published on the University of Florida website, as it is on the Rate My Professor website, for other students to see. When reviewing the numeric portion of the course evaluation for potential professors, students did not find this information terribly useful.

### Response Motivators

Students indicated they were more likely to respond to the course evaluation with certain motivating factors. Subthemes included incentives, bipolar feelings, time in class, instructor passion and compassion and formative versus summative feedback.

### Incentives

Participants indicated they were the most likely to complete the course evaluation if incentives were provided by the professor. One participant put it as, *"...if I am being offered extra credit, I'll do those [evaluations] first and then I'll do the ones I feel the most strongly about. And then if I am like, ah, I have free time, I'll just do the rest, but if not, skip it."* Often, if the class met a certain threshold of responses, then the entire class would get some form of reward. Some participants indicated concern that the use of incentives could decrease the quality of data of the course evaluation. For example, one participant indicated he would likely complete the evaluation as quickly as possible just to get it done, with very little concern for the quality of response he was giving.

### Bipolar Feelings

Participants indicated they were likely to complete the course evaluation if they strongly liked or disliked a professor or course. One student commented, "I will fill out the evaluation if I really like the teacher or if I don't like the teacher." Additionally, many indicated that the overriding emotion was that of negativity; if they disliked the professor or their teaching they were more likely to respond than if they liked the professor or their teaching.

### Time in Class

Participants indicated they appreciated it when instructors offered time in class to complete the evaluation. One participant stated that he had good intentions, but if an instructor did not give time in class, he may forget.

### Instructor Passion and Compassion

Participants indicated they were more likely to complete the course evaluation if the instructor cared about



the course and about students. Instructors who showed they valued feedback and used formative assessments throughout the semester appeared as caring. One focus group participant said, *"I've had situations where you email the professor seven times and not gotten a response and then you ask, can you fill out the evaluation forms and I'm like, yeah, right, why am I going to help you?"*

### Formative Versus Summative Feedback

Participants often indicated they valued formative assessments that would influence the direction of a course they were currently taking. Further, if an instructor had used formative assessment previously in the course and the student was able to make a connection between student input and a modification to the existing course, they were more likely to fill out the summative course evaluation.

### Logistic Challenges

Several challenges with the logistics of completing the course evaluation emerged. Comments focused on the timing of the course evaluations that opened at the end of the semester when students were completing final exams. Subthemes associated here were participant fatigue, low priority and cognitive load.

### Participant Fatigue

Participants felt fatigued when completing the course evaluation. As one participant put it, "[Course evaluations are] all dumped on you at once." Students would often try to complete all of the course evaluations at the same time. However, if participants were pushed for time, or felt fatigued, they were likely to complete the evaluations for courses they felt strongly about first, or the ones for courses whose instructors offered incentives. Other evaluations may or may not be completed.

### Low Priority

Several participants indicated that at the time of the release of course evaluations, which students received in the form of an e-mail, students also received a deluge of other emails. Students focused on myriad issues at the end of the semester and, consequently, completing a course evaluation simply slipped lower on their priority list.

### Cognitive Load

Participants indicated they felt that completing the course evaluations all at the same time created a large cognitive demand. Several participants indicated frustration from trying to remember details from multiple courses simultaneously as they were trying to complete all of the evaluations at the same time.

### Frustration

The tone of several student comments was that of frustration. The emotions appeared to range from apathy to relative open hostility toward the course evaluation. Subthemes were who looks at them and ambiguous motivators.

### Who Looks at Them?

Students intended this as both a cynical statement as well as an actual question. Many participants did not know what happened to their evaluation after they hit submit. One participant stated, *"The department, like, I feel like it just go to the trash basically. Like I don't feel like it is being evaluated and counted afterwards."*

### Ambiguous Motivators

More than one participant indicated they were told the reason to fill out the course evaluation was because it was demanded by the department chair. Participants indicated this did not serve much toward motivating them to complete the course evaluation.

### Discussion

Instructors perceived a context based on reciprocity, communication, concern for student input and service yielded improved response rates for online course evaluations. Students echoed these sentiments by indicating they were more likely to complete the course evaluation if they felt strongly positive or negative toward an instructor. Perhaps eliciting emotions from the student and making personal connections between instructor, student and the material at hand allowed the student to feel personally connected to the situation and therefore more likely to do something to benefit others. Spence and Lenze (2002) also noted value in creating a culture that took student criticism seriously.

Instructors used several tactics to boost response rates. Many used incentives successfully which was also identified as a strong motivating factor by students. Instructors must consider the possible tradeoff between the quality and quantity of responses received when incentives are used. The use of incentives and their effectiveness matched the results of other studies (Crews and Curtis, 2011; Dommeyer et al., 2004). Additionally, using peer pressure, open dialogue about progress on response rates and frequent reminders also helped to encourage students to find the time and motivation to complete the course evaluation. Further, frequent reminders in various forms such as e-mail, in person and peer to peer helped boost response rates which was consistent with other several other studies (Guder and Malliaris, 2013; Norris and Conn, 2005; Ravenscroft and Enyeart, 2009).

Handling logistical issues may affect students' choice and ability to complete the course evaluations. Students appeared to appreciate being given time in class. The university deployed evaluations all at once and at a very busy time of the academic year. Therefore, it is little wonder that students placed a low priority on completing the course evaluation. Providing time in class, similar to the paper and pencil system, may provide the necessary means for a student who would otherwise not complete the course evaluation.

Students were looking for evidence that their efforts to provide feedback would lead to change. Instructors who helped students understand the purpose of course

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evaluations had greater response rates, which aligns with conclusions made by Guder and Malliaris (2013). Norris and Conn (2005) also noted the importance of explaining the value of course evaluations to students. Findings from this study indicate both staff and students recognized the value of using formative assessments. Instructors must make a strong connection between perceived effort on the part of the student and perceived reward in the form of a change in the course. This may also point to the value students seemed to place on the Rate My Professors website, as it seemed to fill an information void that students felt lacked in the current structure of the summative assessment of course evaluations. Interestingly, one study indicated this website set a tone that generated comments about instructors' personality, workload ease and entertainment value over actual knowledge gained (Davidson and Price, 2009).

## Recommendations for Practice

First, incorporate the variety of tactics described in this study, such as using formative assessment, frequent reminders and incentives. Second, anticipate logistical challenges students may encounter before and during the completion of online course evaluations and work to mitigate them. Consider giving time in class, or scaffold the deployment of online course evaluations so students have time to complete the evaluation without feeling overwhelmed. Finally, help students find value in the course evaluation process by explaining the purpose of course evaluations and providing examples of how their efforts yield change in individual courses as well as campus wide. By drawing examples of how previous student input helped shape policies, procedures and class culture, students may feel more empowered in the process of course evaluations and therefore more willing to complete them.

## Recommendations for Future Research

First, explore the notion of student motivation more thoroughly. As student motivational dynamics shift, their willingness to participate in routine university procedures may decrease, despite the implementation of best practices. A firm understanding of the relationship between student motivation and willingness to participate in procedures, such as online course evaluations, would provide necessary insight. Second, conduct a similar study concerning courses taught exclusively online. The field of online learning is growing and suffers the same, if not a worse fate, of poor course evaluations response rates. Researchers should study courses taught within colleges of agriculture that are exclusively online with a similar focus as this study.

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