SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY.

Report on Spring 2018 Surveys of Faculty, Academic Administrators, and Students About New Course Evaluations

Background

In Fall 2017, Provost Nancy Brickhouse adopted a new Policy on Student Evaluation of Courses as well as instituted, a new web-based student course evaluation (SCE) software tool with a set of University-wide questions. To gather feedback from all constituents about the implementation of the new course evaluations, the Office of the Provost administered a survey in February-March 2018 to all students (excluding most of the School of Medicine), and a second survey to all St. Louis-based faculty, department/program chairs, associate deans, and deans (again, excluding most of the School of Medicine). Key results from those two surveys are summarized below. *If you are interested in more comprehensive report data, please contact Assistant Provost Steve Sanchez at x2611 or steven.sanchez@slu.edu*

Following the summaries is a brief discussion of key points from the data, as well as listing of changes already made to the course evaluation system for Fall 2018 and changes to be implemented in future terms.

Summary of Student Survey Responses

About the Population Surveyed
The first survey was administered to all SLU students, excluding the following:
- School of Medicine (except for Medical Family Therapy program students)
- 1818 Program
- Prison Program
- Non-degree students, except for those in Academic English
- Inter-University Students
- Visiting Young Scholars

Respondent Group	# Surveyed	# Respondents	Response Rate
Students (UG and GR)	10,488	1349	13%

Length of Course Evaluation Period
70% of students responded that the length of the course evaluation period was "just about right."
- 7% indicated that the period was "too short"
- 8% indicated that the period was "too long"
- 15% had "no opinion"

Difficulty/Ease of Accessing or Submitting Course Evaluations
99% of students responded that they had no difficulty accessing or submitting their course evaluations.

Opportunity to Provide Meaningful Feedback
89% of students responded that they either "Agreed" (62%) or "Strongly Agreed" (27%) that the new course evaluation gave them the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback about the course.

Suggestions for Questions to be Added or Removed From the Course Evaluation

Students were asked if any questions should be added to or removed from the evaluation. No student indicated that any question(s) should be removed. A number of suggestions for questions to be added were provided; suggestions shared by at least five students are listed below:

1. Add "Comment" boxes after each question and each section of the course evaluation form for further explanation of Likert scale responses. (16 responses)
2. Add questions directed at specifics of the course and discipline (not just "general" qualities of teaching and course design). (9 responses)
3. How well did the instructor teach the material? (6 responses)
4. What did you like most about the course or instructor (or, What was the most effective attribute of the course or instructor)? (5 responses)
5. What did you like least about the course or instructor (or, What was the least effective attribute of the course or instructor)? (5 responses)
6. How could the instructor improve the course? (5 responses)
7. Did use of the textbook support your achievement of the course learning outcomes? (Or some variant of that kind of question to determine how much the textbook was used and was helpful to student success in the course.) (5 responses)

Effective Ways to Encourage Students to Complete Course Evaluations

Students were asked whether or not certain actions would be effective ways to encourage them to complete the course evaluations. Results are provided in the table below.

	Effective	Not Effective
Discussions in class about how your instructors have used course evaluation data in the past to improve courses.	80%	20%
Verbal reminders from instructors in class about completing the course evaluations.	81%	20%
Instructors set aside class time for students to complete the course evaluations in class (either on classroom computers or cellphones).	75%	25%
E-mailed reminders directly from instructors to students about completing the course evaluations.	72%	28%
E-mail reminders from administrators/SLU Assessment Office about completing the course evaluations.	65%	35%
Other (see note below)	60%	40%

Themes from the "Other" responses:

1. Faculty should offer some form of extra credit for students who complete the evaluations. (44 responses)
   - *Note: "Incentives" such as extra credit are explicitly prohibited per the University Policy on Course Evaluations*
2. SLU should extend the evaluation period past the final exam period (6 responses)
3. SLU (or faculty) should share with students the impact of evaluation responses on faculty, on course design, on efforts to improve courses. (15 responses)
   - *Note: A version of this response theme was also one of the "standard" responses offered above, with nearly 80% of students indicating this would be an effective way to encourage the completion of the course evaluations.*

Final Comments

At the end of the survey, students were asked to provide any other comments they wished to share. 208 total comments were provided. Comments shared by more than five students are presented below.

1. Students should be informed about how responses to previous course evaluations were actually used by faculty or administrators (or similar comments indicating students don't believe that the data from course evaluations is actually used). (32 responses)
2. The course evaluation tool was designed and/or administered well (or similar positive comments indicating no changes are needed). (23 responses)

3. The course evaluation period should be extended beyond finals to get greater participation and/or more complete feedback. (20 responses)
4. Instituting a mid-semester course evaluation would be helpful for improvements to be made for the remainder of the semester. (9 responses)
5. Class time should be set aside for the completion of the course evaluations. (9 responses)
6. Anonymity for students submitting course evaluations is critical (or similar responses about the need to preserve or enhance student anonymity). (7 responses)
7. Questions should be more customized to different types/levels of courses (or similar comments about the desire for more course-specific questions). (6 responses)

Summary of Faculty/Academic Administrator Survey Responses

About the Population Surveyed

The second survey was administered to all faculty, department chairs (or formally designated program chairs), deans, assistant deans, and associate deans (note: Madrid faculty were not included but their feedback was gathered by Dean Vita and shared with the Provost's Office). Since only one department in the School of Medicine utilized the new evaluations, all others in the SOM were excluded. The distribution of those solicited and those who responded to the survey is provided below.

Respondent Group	# Surveyed	# Respondents	Response Rate
Faculty	971	236	25%
Department/Program Chairs	36	18	50%
Deans & Associate/Assistant Deans	34	11	32%
Total	1041	265	25%

Length of Course Evaluation Period

60% of faculty/administrators responded that the length of the course evaluation period was "just about right."
- 16% indicated that the period was "too short"
- 23% indicated that the period was "too long"

There were 108 comments provided about the length or timing of the course evaluation period. The most significant themes in those comments are provided below.

1. The course evaluation period should close before students' final grades are posted. (26 responses)
   - *Note: Although official, final grades posted by the University Registrar were not released to students until after the close of the course evaluation period, many faculty made final grades available to students before the end of the course evaluation period via Blackboard or some other means of communication.*
2. The course evaluation period should end before the final exam week.   (25 responses)
   - *Note: Many such responses included a reference to the concern that a negative final exam experience could disproportionately influence a student's course evaluation responses.*
3. The course evaluation period should include the final exam week. (10 responses)
   - *Note: Many such responses included a reference to the concern that final exams are part of a course and should, therefore, be included in the scope of the course evaluation.*

Who has Accessed Fall 2017 Course Evaluation Reports

Respondents were asked whether or not they had, at the point of completing this survey, accessed course evaluation reports to which they have been granted access. Results are as follows:

Respondent Group	Have Accessed	Have Not Accessed
Faculty	98%	2%
Department/Program Chairs	94%	6%
Deans & Associate/Assistant Deans	73%	27%

Difficulty/Ease of Accessing Faculty Course Evaluation Reports

91% of faculty responded that they had no difficulty accessing course evaluation reports.

Clarity of Faculty Course Evaluation Reports
82% of faculty responded that course evaluation reports presented student response data clearly. Of the comments associated with those faculty who responded that the reports did not present the data clearly, there were no significant shared, common themes or issues.

Suggestions for Questions to be Added to the Course Evaluation Form
Faculty, chairs, and deans/assistant deans/associate deans were asked if any questions should be added to the evaluation form. 68% of all respondents indicated that no new questions needed to be added. From the 32% of respondents who indicated that some question(s) should be added, 70 suggestions were offered. Additional question suggestions shared by at least five respondents each are as follows:

1. There is a desire for customization at the department and course levels. (19 responses)
2. An "overall" question about instructor performance should be added. (14 responses)
3. An "overall" question about the quality of the course should be added. (8 responses)
4. Lab, clinical, and field experience-type courses warrant separate questions or a separate survey. (5 responses)

Suggestions for Questions to be Removed From the Course Evaluation Form
Faculty and academic administrators were asked if any questions should be removed from the evaluation form. 83% of all respondents indicated that no questions warranted removal. From the 17% of respondents who indicated that some question(s) should be removed, the only notably recurring suggestion (from 11 respondents) was to remove in its entirety the set of questions in which students were asked about their own motivations and behaviors related to their performance in the course.
- *Note: Those questions are included because a) they can provide additional context informing the interpretation of other student responses and b) because research demonstrates how asking such reflective questions at the outset of a course evaluation form can help students respond to subsequent questions with greater acknowledgement of their own responsibility for success in a course.*

Suggestions for Questions to be Modified
Faculty, chairs, and deans/assistant deans/associate deans were asked if any questions on the course evaluation form should be modified. 76% of all respondents indicated that no questions warranted modification. The 24% of respondents who indicated that some question(s) should be modified offered 52 suggestions. The most frequently repeated suggestions are provided below.

1. Lab, clinical, and field experience-type courses warrant separate questions or a separate survey. (2 responses)
2. A five-point Likert scale should replace the current four-point scale. (3 responses)
3. Questions that reference multiple items (e.g., "readings, discussions, labs, assignments, exams") should be broken down so students can comment on each of the items discretely. (4 responses)

Use of the Course Evaluation Data
Faculty, chairs, and deans/assistant deans/associate deans who accessed their respective course evaluations were asked if the student responses prompted them to consider any of a number of actions. Summarized below are the responses from faculty to that question:

Potential Action Prompted by Student SCE Responses	Yes	No	# of Respondents
Modifications to course learning outcomes.	24.34%	75.66%	226
Modifications to textbooks, readings, in-class exercises, assignments, exams, etc.	57.27%	42.73%	227
Modifications to lectures, discussions, labs/studio work, etc.	57.89%	42.11%	228
Modifications to the pace of certain lessons/units or the course as a whole.	40.97%	59.03%	227

Modifications to grading practices or how you give feedback on student work.	29.96%	70.04%	227
Modifications to the ways you communicate with or otherwise interact with students.	34.80%	65.20%	227
Modifications to how you integrate content or prior student learning from pre-requisite or other related courses (core, major, etc.).	22.57%	77.43%	226

Final Comments

At the end of the survey, faculty and academic administrators were asked to provide any other comments they wished to share.   154 total comments were provided.   Similar comments expressed by more than five respondents each are presented below.

1. Student response rates need to be increased or the data will be (or will be perceived to be) of limited value. (23 responses)
    -   *Note: For the Fall 2017 administration of the new, online course evaluations, the University-wide response rate was 62%.*
2. The evaluation should allow for inclusion of instructor-, program-, and/or department-designed questions. (18 responses)
3. Separate questions or evaluation forms for a) lab and b) clinical/practicum/field-experience-type courses are needed. (10 responses)
4. Data from surveys such as this should not be used to evaluate faculty. (9 responses)
5. Evaluation forms such as this have limited validity and/or evidence bias. (7 responses)
6. The new evaluation forces some departments to change historical practices of formally coding faculty assigned to courses in Banner. (7 responses)
7. The evaluation period should end before the final exam period begins. (5 responses)
8. The 4-point Likert scale should be changed to a 5- (or more) point scale. (5 responses)
9. A question soliciting an "overall" rating of the course should be added. (5 responses)

Discussion: Key Points

Throughout the two-year planning and implementation process for the new course evaluations, the staff from the Office of the Provost met with groups of deans, department chairs, the Academic Affairs Committee of the Faculty Senate (twice), and the Academic Affairs Committee of the College of Arts & Sciences Faculty Council to discuss the new policy and evaluation instrument.

Throughout those meetings, several concerns were expressed by some within those constituencies. Aware of those concerns, the Office of the Provost intentionally included questions on the Spring 2018 surveys to collect additional, more widespread feedback about them. Below is a brief discussion of the most oft-cited concerns informed by the responses to the two surveys summarized above.

Timing and Length of the Course Evaluation Period

Concern has been expressed by various faculty and chairs that the course evaluation period for most standard-length courses includes the final exam week as officially designated by the University Registrar; more specifically, the concern was that a negative final exam experience might disproportionately influence a student's course evaluation responses and that, therefore, the course evaluation period should end before final exams are administered.

As noted in the summary of the survey of faculty and academic administrators, the majority of respondents (60%) indicated that the current length of the evaluation period was "just about right"; an additional 16% indicated that the current period was "too short." And while there were 25 comments offered advocating for closing the evaluation period before the Registrar's officially-designated final exam week, there were also 10 comments from faculty and academic administrators supporting the inclusion of final exam week in the course evaluation period – many noting that since exams and grading are part of the course experience, they should be experienced fully before the close of the course evaluation period.

Additionally, 70% of students responded via their survey that the course evaluation period that included final exam

week was "just about right"; and the third most-cited "Final Comment" offered on the student survey was that the course evaluation period should be extended even further to allow additional time for more complete student feedback and a greater student response rate.

Finally, research conducted on Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 course evaluation responses here at SLU does not support the hypothesis noted above that faculty will likely receive meaningfully lower course evaluation ratings from evaluations submitted during or after the final exam period than those submitted prior to the final exam period. For example, we studied responses to the five "Questions About the Instructor" on the University-wide evaluation form for the colleges/schools that follow the "standard" University academic calendar (and have the same formally-designated final exam period) for most of its programs. We compared the differences in responses submitted before the traditional final exam period versus those submitted during or after the final exam period. The results show only minor variations in responses between the two groups; in 80% of the response categories the differences (either positive or negative) never exceeded 2%; for the remaining 20% of response categories, the greatest difference (pre- vs. during/after the final exam period) for any single response category was 7.6%. Moreover, when we looked at the same data specifically in departments offering courses in which students traditionally earn high proportions of "D" and "F" grades, we found similar overall results.

These data indicate that submission of responses during or after the final exam period is not generally associated with more negative student feedback. Accordingly, at this time these data do not appear to warrant the shortening of the course evaluation period to exclude final exam week. However, in future years, as we monitor the course evaluation process, gather more data, and seek additional input, we will revisit this issue for potential change.

NOTE: A separate concern about the length of the course evaluation period for short-term courses (those that meet for one to seven weeks) is being addressed separately.

The Course Evaluation Period and Relationship to the Registrar's Grade Submission Date

Concern has been expressed by various faculty and chairs that the course evaluation period should end before students can "see their grades"; more specifically, the concern was that an unexpected or "low" final grade might disproportionately influence a student's course evaluation responses and that, therefore, the course evaluation period should end before students know what their final grades are. In the survey of faculty and academic administrators, 26 comments stressed this point.

In fact, starting in Fall 2017 **the course evaluation period was closed before the University Registrar released final grades to students through the official Banner system**. However, many faculty choose make available through the Blackboard system (or other means) the status of students' grades at multiple points throughout the term (which is a sound practice, helpful to students). If faculty continue to make that choice, students will always have such ways of calculating (or being directly informed of) their grades at various points of the term. Note that these are not students' official, final grades as maintained in Banner and on their transcripts.

So while official grades are and will continue to be withheld by the University Registrar from students until after the close of the course evaluation period for all courses, no matter when the course evaluation period ends there will likely always be faculty who choose to inform students of their grades before students submit course evaluations.

The Ability to Add Program-Specific ("Customized") Questions

A concern had been expressed by various faculty and chairs – primarily from the College of Arts and Sciences, which is the most curricularly-diverse academic unit – that the ability to add "customized" questions beyond the University-wide required questions was initially limited to "the college level"; in other words, each college or school is already allowed to develop and add up to 10 of their own, "custom" questions (and several colleges did just that), but each *department* within a college is not yet able to do so.

Faculty and academic administrators, and even some students, made clear in their survey responses that the ability to add customized, or program-specific questions was very important to soliciting more meaningful and actionable student response data. As noted below, this request is well-understood and will be implemented as technical resources are made available.

Separate Questions/Survey for Labs, Clinicals, and Similar Courses

Related to the "question customization" concern addressed directly above, faculty also expressed concerns about the need for course evaluations for labs, clinicals, and other "experiential" courses to ask some different questions than asked for more "standard" courses. This is another request that will be addressed in the coming terms, as noted below. More discussions with faculty should help clarify if customized questions in addition to the standard University-wide questions will suffice, or if an entirely different evaluation form will be needed.

Questions About "Overall" Course Quality/Instructor Performance
Survey responses by students and the faculty/academic administrator group indicate some interest in adding one or more questions aimed at soliciting from students an "overall" rating or assessment of a course and/or the respective faculty member. Often such questions are expressed similar to the following:

- *Overall, I rate this instructor as [excellent, average, poor, etc.]*
- *Overall, I rate this course as [excellent, average, poor, etc.]*
- *I would recommend this course to a friend. [Definitely, Maybe, Absolutely Not, etc.]*

Regardless of the specific form they take, these kinds of summary questions are problematic on several fronts. First, they exist explicitly to distill all other evaluative feedback about a faculty member or course into a single "final grade" of sorts. Accordingly, they suffer from the same drawback that standard final course grades do: in their attempt to summarize in aggregate form multiple, discrete responses or evaluative statements, they can distort and misrepresent those discrete components.

As singular data elements meant to "summarize" SCE data, numerical scores on such summary questions are "easy" to report on and understand (or misunderstand, as is typically the case; many faculty and chairs even calculate averages of average SCE scores, or averages of median scores, in an effort to distill all the course evaluation data down to a single number – a practice widely and strongly discouraged in the literature). In many cases, the more complex, nuanced data is never even provided in promotion and tenure documentation *because* the summary question data is easily available and reportable.

Accordingly, the set of SLU University-Wide course evaluation questions explicitly excludes any such summary/"overall" questions, and will continue to do so.

Student Responses Rates
For the Fall 2017 administration of the new University-wide course evaluations, the overall student response rate was 62%. All of us at SLU – faculty, staff, and students – hope and expect to increase that rate.

From the expansive research literature on this topic, we know that increased student response rates on SCEs (as well as the submission of more meaningful, actionable responses) are tied to regular, proactive, and transparent communication from faculty and academic leaders explicitly about how course evaluation data is and has been used for improvement efforts. Via their survey responses addressed above, SLU's students made this their most oft-cited request in their final comments; and 80% of students indicated that faculty discussing how they've used such data in the past to inform their course design and/or pedagogy is an effective way to encourage student submission of course evaluations.

Additionally, the survey data above established that student response data from course evaluations for Fall 2017 was accessed by 98% of faculty respondents and 94% of department/program chairs. Further, significant percentages of faculty indicated on via their survey that student responses from the Fall 2017 course evaluations had already prompted them to consider changes to course learning outcomes, course materials/texbooks, lectures/discussions/labs, grading practices, how they communicate with students, etc. So faculty are indeed hearing what students have to say in the course evaluations, and they are indeed using that data. But we must find ways to regularly communicate with students about how and when faculty use course evaluation data, as that is critical to helping students see the importance of – and, therefore respond to – such requests for their feedback.

Changes Already Made, and Changes Still to Come

In addition to feedback received via these two surveys, we met with department chairs in mid-Spring 2018; we've also been continually receiving feedback from faculty, administrators, and students who utilize the dedicated courseeval@slu.edu e-mail. Based on all such feedback received thus far, we've implemented a number of changes and hope to make additional changes when possible, as noted below.

Changes Already Implemented (in Spring 2018 and Summer 2018):

1. Students with a registration status of "Audit" will not be invited to participate in SCEs.

2. Median scores have been added to complement mean scores where applicable on SCE reports.

3. The five-response minimum threshold necessary for the generation of SCE reports has been removed; the new minimum threshold is two.

4. Faculty can now see which students have completed and have not completed a survey so that they can encourage submission by those who have not done so (without offering any kind of incentive, which is prohibited per University policy); this function also allows faculty to see whether a particular student has already been sent course evaluation-related e-mails from the evaluation system. This can help keep students from being overwhelmed with e-mail reminders.

5. We replaced two multi-faceted questions with several discrete questions to solicit more discrete responses on the same topics.

6. We added a specific question about the usefulness of required textbooks/readings.

7. We added "Comments" boxes after each discrete question in the "Questions about the Course" and "Questions about the Instructor" sections of the course evaluation form.

8. We added a question that asks students to provide suggestions for improving the course.

9. We modified the evaluation period for shorter-term courses (particularly those that meet for one to seven weeks).

10. The Provost will ask all faculty, chairs, and deans to implement means for communicating with their students specifically when and how course evaluation data has been used for course improvement, faculty development, program improvement, etc.

11. The Provost will ask all faculty, chairs, and deans to consider conducting some means of collecting feedback from students mid-course/mid-term, and to use that information formatively as appropriate. The Reinert Center can support academic units seeking guidance on how best to solicit and utilize such mid-course feedback.

Additional Changes to be Implemented in Fall 2018 or Spring 2019:

1. We will work to add the ability for each academic department to add up to 10 customized/department-written questions to the course evaluation form for all courses in that department.
    - *Note: Because of the additional technical resources involved in doing so, we will likely have to phase this in on a college-by-college basis; based on expressed demand for this functionality thus far, we plan to begin with selected departments in the College of Arts and Sciences.*

2. We will work to add either a) a separate University-wide form for laboratory courses or b) additional questions pertinent to such courses; this might include questions customized at the college or department level.

3. We will work to add either a) a separate University-wide form for clinical/practicum/field experience courses or b) additional questions pertinent to such courses; this might include questions customized at the college or department level.

4. We will work to modify the evaluation period for shorter-term courses (particularly those that meet for anywhere from one to seven weeks).

A Final Note

We are aware that many of the SCE-related questions and concerns expressed in the past year are rooted primarily in how SCE data is used for rank and tenure decisions, as well as annual merit evaluations. SLU's new Policy on Course Evaluations makes it clear that the new SCE questions/survey form were written primarily for the formative improvement of teaching – **not** summative faculty evaluation.   The Policy also makes clear that the evaluation of a faculty member's teaching is **explicitly not to be based solely on SCE data**.

Deans and chairs have been advised that SCE data should comprise no more than a small proportion of all data considered in evaluations of teaching. It is acknowledged that faculty and academic leaders need to work together to advance efforts to evaluate and support the improvement of teaching more comprehensively, and to ensure that SCE data is only one – and comparatively minor – element of a multi-faceted evaluation and support system.

Experts in the Reinert Center are available to assist faculty, chairs, and deans in defining their own, discipline-specific standards of excellence in teaching, as well as to assist them in developing high-quality, multi-faceted protocols for the assessment and evaluation of discipline-specific teaching that rely only minimally on student course evaluation data, emphasizing instead data gleaned from some of the following:

- peer/supervisor classroom observations
- faculty self-evaluation
- peer/supervisor teaching portfolio reviews (including self-narrative/evaluation, philosophy statement, syllabi, exams/assignments, representative samples of student learning, etc.)
- analysis of grades and grade distribution patterns in both disciplinary and cross-disciplinary contexts
- review of student achievement of course learning outcomes, and how faculty use such data to improve course design and/or pedagogies

All of the above-noted practices are in keeping with the literature on effective approaches to evaluating teaching effectiveness.

And, finally, note that the Office of the Provost resoundingly supports efforts to a) minimize and appropriately weight the influence of student course evaluation data in promotion, tenure, and merit evaluations and b) supports the implementation of the various means described above for more meaningful and more equitable evaluation of teaching.

Report compiled in Summer 2018 and presented to the Provost for University-wide distribution in August 2018.