Online vs. Traditional Course Evaluation Formats: Student Perceptions

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Abstract

The decision on whether to offer end-of-course evaluations in an electronic format or in traditional scan sheet format generates conflicting viewpoints. From an expediency perspective, offering evaluations online saves time and money and returns the results to faculty more quickly. From a student point of view, concerns involve convenience and anonymity. This study examines the issue from the student viewpoint to identify opposition, support, concerns, and preferences for each format. An analysis of the results reports commonalities and differences in responses based on variables such as gender, experience with online evaluations, and program level. Analysis also draws conclusions about improving the use of end-of-course evaluations.

Introduction

Among instructional areas in higher education, few areas cause more interest than course evaluations, and few areas have been studied more for validity and reliability (Wachtel, 1998). From the viewpoint of students, end-of-course evaluations provide the opportunity to give the feedback that faculty find so helpful. Although some students may harbor doubts about the effectiveness of evaluations, few would abdicate the opportunity to pass judgment on the course and suggest improvements. Course evaluations provide a way for students to lodge a complaint, extend a compliment, express appreciation, improve a course, and most importantly, participate in the learning community.

At a time when incorporating online methods, even into on-site courses, is no longer a novelty, online course evaluations bring the advantage of saving time and resources over traditional paper and pencil scan sheet method. The research questions posed in this study were these:

1. Which evaluation format is preferred by students and why?
2. Are format preferences and reasons related to program level, gender, and prior online evaluation experience?
3. What can we learn about improving students' experiences with faculty evaluations delivered online?

Perspectives from the Literature

Students, administrators, support staff, and faculty all have a stake in whether student evaluations of faculty are delivered online or in the traditional paper and pencil manner. Administrators may wish to save money, in the form of paper Scantron sheets, machines to score evaluations, pencils, and most importantly, staff time. Support staff may spend days, even weeks, scanning, tabulating, and collating evaluations (Dommeyer, C., Baum, P., Hanna, R., &

Chapman, K., 2004). Staff may need to aggregate quantitative scores, retype comments so that student anonymity is retained, distribute and collect the evaluations, and prepare both administrative and faculty hard copies (Dommeyer et al., 2004).

It may be inconvenient for adjunct faculty and weekend faculty to return the evaluations to the proper office in a manner that maintains confidentiality, as the main office may be closed. In many classes, evaluations are often delivered the last night of class. The procedure has faculty passing out the evaluations, reading the instructions to the students, and then leaving the room. Students complete the evaluation and one student is tasked with taking the completed evaluations to the proper office. For night and weekend faculty, the office is closed and inaccessible. At the research site, the office is located on an upper floor, and for security purposes, the elevator does not go to that floor after hours. Faculty or a student may have to hold onto the evaluations for a day or more and take them to the office when it is open, jeopardizing the confidentiality of the process.

The benefits of having students complete faculty evaluations online as compared to the traditional paper format include time and cost savings and faster reporting of results (Kuhtman, 2004). Often it takes months for staff to return traditional evaluation results to faculty, by which time it may be too late to implement changes based on students' comments and scores. Online results can be made available to faculty within days instead of weeks. For these and other reasons, many institutions are moving toward or have implemented online or electronic student evaluations of faculty.

While students may not be as interested in saving time and money as administrators or support staff, they have reasons of their own for preferring one form of evaluation delivery to another. Students may perceive either the traditional or the online format as more anonymous, and research indicates anonymity to be important to students (Carini et al., 2003; Dommeyer et al., 2004). Some research has shown online evaluations are less susceptible to faculty influence (Anderson, Cain, & Bird, 2005; Dommeyer, Baum, Chapman, & Hanna, 2002). Some students perceive online evaluations as more anonymous (Ravelli, 2002).

Students may appreciate the flexibility of online evaluations; they are able to take the evaluation at a time of their choice and spend as much or as little time as they choose completing the evaluation. Online surveys may result in more open ended responses or comments because students have additional time available (Dommeyer et al., 2002). Students believe the online format allows them to provide more effective and more constructive feedback than the traditional paper format (Anderson et al., 2005; Ravelli, 2002). Recent research supports this belief as online evaluations generate substantially more constructive student comments (Donovan, Mader, & Shinsky, 2006).

Research reports that students prefer completing online faculty evaluations to paper ones (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Layne, DeCristoforo, & McGinty, 1999). In the Anderson survey, over 90% of students marked Agree or Strongly Agree when asked if they preferred online to traditional evaluation format (Anderson et al., 2005).

Online evaluations have disadvantages, such as requiring students to have computer access, students needing to know their login information, and students experiencing technical problems when accessing the evaluation (Anderson et al., 2005). Online evaluations usually have lower student response rates as students may not take the time or remember to complete the evaluation if it is not done in class (Laubsch, 2006). Sax, Gilmartin, and Bryant (2003) identified several concerns with online evaluations, such as the fact that lengthy online survey instruments

have fewer responses than shorter ones, and students may reach the saturation point and not want to fill out additional online surveys.

Research says little about the preferences of different types of students. One study looked only at undergraduate students and concluded that more affluent, younger males are more likely than comparable females to complete online surveys as compared to paper ones (Sax et al., 2003). Thorpe (2002) looked at gender, minority status, grade received in the class, and grade point average in three computer science, math, and statistics classes. Results showed gender was significant, and that women were more likely than men to complete the online evaluation as compared to the traditional in-class paper evaluation (Thorpe, 2002).

A comprehensive survey to identify and clarify student preferences was designed to address some of these issues. The goals were to discover not only which evaluation delivery method students prefer, but the reason for these preferences. The researchers also sought to discover differences in responses between students by gender and program level.

Research Methods

A study involving College of Education students were conducted at a large Midwestern comprehensive public university. Participants were drawn from the same college within the university in order to ensure common course experiences and evaluation forms.

The college uses Blackboard course sites to administer online student evaluations of faculty. One site is created by the Blackboard administrator for each class for which the faculty indicated they wished to deliver the evaluation online. This ensures confidentiality, as only students can complete or access the evaluations. The identical evaluation instrument is used for both traditional and online formats. Faculty are free to choose the format (traditional or online) they prefer, and how they administer the evaluation (in class or allowing students to complete the online evaluation on their own). Traditional evaluations are usually given to students during the last class session. The online evaluations are available for a 2-week period near the end of the semester. Some faculty take students to a computer lab during the last class session to complete the online evaluations, but most simply tell students the evaluations are available online and ask them to complete them before the class ends.

All students who had taken at least one class in the college during the previous year were e-mailed a link to an anonymous electronic survey during the summer of 2006. This survey was created and administered using the online survey software *SurveyMonkey* (SurveyMonkey.com). Students who did not respond to the original e-mail within a week were sent a second request. Student surveys were returned by 851 individuals, from a total of 4052 sent. All 4052 email addresses were generated by the university database, although many (approximately 250) emails were returned as not deliverable. Thirty-eight students declined to respond.

The survey asked students to indicate their faculty evaluation format preferences, reasons for the preferences, and demographic data. The survey also contained a section for open-ended responses. The results were then analyzed to determine students' preference for online or traditional evaluations. The data were further analyzed to see if undergraduates varied from graduates in their preference, males or females preferred one evaluation format to another, and if students who have completed more evaluations online prefer the online or traditional format. The researcher asked students the reasons for their preferences, and their responses illuminated the survey results and described implications for practice.

SurveyMonkey is a powerful online survey tool which allows users to analyze results of surveys in several ways. One of these methods involves filtering (cross tabulating). Using the filter feature, researchers were able to determine the response of males or females and graduate or undergraduate students, as well as compare variables such as experience with online evaluation to location preference. The survey allowed for general comments and student comments directed at specific survey questions, such as student preference regarding where the online survey is delivered (in a computer lab or on their own outside of class). Comments were filtered and grouped by student gender, program level, experience with online evaluations, or any combination of the variables. Therefore it was possible to isolate, for example, the comments of female undergraduates who had completed online evaluations three to four times and who preferred to complete the evaluations in the traditional format. The data analysis tools in *SurveyMonkey* allowed researchers to analyze and report both quantitative and qualitative data from over 800 respondents accurately and quickly.

Results of Student Surveys

Table 1 provides a picture of the students who completed the survey. Two demographic questions were asked at the beginning of the survey regarding program level and gender.

Table 1: *Demographics (N=831)*

Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Within Program Level, Within Gender			
Undergrad N=431	Graduate N=397	Male N=161	Female N=669	Undergrad Male N=90	Undergrad Female N= 341	Grad Male N=70	Grad Female N=326
51.9%	48.1%	19.4%	80.6%	10.8%	41.0%	8.4%	39.2%

(Note: Percentages will not always equal 100% because not every respondent responded to every question.)

Demographic data show that graduate and undergraduate program levels were almost equally represented among the respondents, with slightly more undergraduate respondents than graduate. Females greatly outnumbered males, the usual case for Colleges of Education, which serve mostly pre-service and in-service teachers.

To address the second research question about differences in student responses based on gender and program level, the researchers wanted to find out if graduate or undergraduate students, and male or female students had more opportunity to take online evaluations. In addition, researchers wanted to know how many took advantage of opportunities and actually completed online faculty evaluations. Table 2 and 3 show the student responses addressing this issue.

Table 2: *Opportunities to complete course evaluations online (N=828)*

Number of Opportunities	Overall Response	Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Within Program Level, Within Gender			
		Under-grad	Grad	Male	Female	Under-grad Male	Under-grad Female	Grad Male	Grad Female
0 times	4.1%	2.3%	6.0%	5.6%	3.7%	5.6%	1.5%	5.7%	6.1%
1-2 times	31.4%	21.3%	42.3%	26.2%	32.7%	13.3%	23.5%	42.9%	42.3%
3-4 times	26.9%	31.6%	21.9%	25.0%	27.3%	27.8%	32.6%	21.4%	21.8%
5 + times	37.6%	44.8%	29.7%	43.1%	36.3%	53.3%	42.5%	30.0%	29.8%

Table 3: *Actual Completion of Course Evaluations Online (N=830)*

Number of Completions	Overall Response	Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Within Program Level, Within Gender			
		Under-grad	Grad	Male	Female	Under-grad Male	Under-grad Female	Grad Male	Grad Female
0 times	8.2%	3.5%	13.4%	9.4%	8.0%	4.4%	3.2%	15.7%	12.9%
1-2 times	31.9%	23.4%	41.2%	26.2%	33.2%	16.7%	25.2%	38.6%	41.5%
3-4 times	27.3%	32.3%	22.2%	30.0%	26.9%	34.4%	31.7%	24.3%	21.8%
5 + times	32.5%	40.8%	23.2%	34.4%	32.0%	44.4%	39.9%	21.4%	23.7%

Overall. Almost all respondents had at least one prior opportunity to complete an end-of-course evaluation in online format. Only 4.1% overall reported that they never had the opportunity to complete a course evaluation online.

When asked about actual completion of online evaluations (rather than opportunities to complete), only 8.2% of respondents reported never having completed an online evaluation. These respondents would comprise the 4.1% who never had an opportunity, along with another 4.1% that had an opportunity but had not followed through. The remainder of the respondents were almost evenly divided between 1-2 completions (31.9%), 3-4 completions (27.3%), and 5 or more completions (32.5%).

Program Level. Comparative results by program level, however, show that undergraduates had more opportunities than graduate students to complete evaluations online. The largest undergraduate response showed that 44.8% had at least 5 opportunities, compared to only 37.6% of graduate students. Conversely, more than twice as many graduate students (6%) reported never having an online opportunity, compared to the percentage of undergraduates who never had an online opportunity (2.3%).

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Comparative results by program level show that far more undergraduates had actually completed online evaluations than graduate students. Over 40% of undergraduates had completed at least five online evaluations, compared to only 23.2% of graduate students who had completed that many. Furthermore, only 3.5% of undergraduates had never completed an online evaluation, compared to 13.4% of graduate students. In fact, program level data show virtual reverse images of each other with over 40% of graduate students completing only one or two online evaluations, compared to a little over 23% of undergraduates. Conversely, over 40% of undergraduates had completed at least five online evaluations, compared to a little over 23% of graduate students.

Gender. Differences in opportunity were also apparent by gender at both the high and low ranges. In the high range, over 43% of all male students had at least five opportunities to complete course evaluations online, while only slightly more than 36% of all female students experienced that many opportunities. In the low range, however, more males (5.6%) than females (3.7%) also reported having no opportunities to complete online evaluations.

Differences in actual completion of online evaluations were also apparent by gender, with male students completing in greater percentages than female students. Although gender differences were less apparent when students were asked about completion than when asked about opportunity, 34.4% of males reported completing at least five evaluations, compared to 32.2% of females

Program Level and Gender. Undergraduate males and females reported more opportunities than graduate males and females did, especially in the high ranges of five or more opportunities. Gender differences were least within the graduate level, with less than a 1% difference in each opportunity range. When looked at together, the greatest variability came between genders at both levels, with the range for males at both levels at 29.5% (0.1%-29.6%) and for females at 14.2% (4.6%-18.8%). Less variability was seen between programs by both genders, with the range for undergraduates at 6.1% (4.1%-10.2%) and the range for graduate students at 0.4% (0.2%-0.6%).

When program and gender were examined together, undergraduate males showed not only a higher completion rate than undergraduate females but also higher than graduate students of either gender. Similarly, more male undergraduates completed five or more evaluations (44.5%) than females did (39.9%). Gender differences were least apparent at the graduate level, with less than a 3% male/female differential at each completion range.

The next survey question asked students to indicate whether they prefer to take the online evaluation on their own by signing in to Blackboard and competing the survey, or if they prefer the class to go to a computer lab together and complete the evaluation. At the university under study, instructors who offer online evaluations offer one of two locations for students to complete them. Some instructors take the class as a group to a computer lab to complete the evaluations, usually during the last class meeting, and others ask that students complete them at their convenience in a location of their choice during the 2-week period the evaluations are available online. Table 4 summarizes students preferences overall in terms of location, preferences by program level, gender and by program level and gender combined.

Table 4: *Location Preference for Online Evaluations (N=826)*

Location Preference	Overall Response	Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Within Program Level, Within Gender			
		Under-grad	Grad	Male	Female	Under-grad Male	Under-grad Female	Grad Male	Grad Female
On Own Time	84.6%	86.1%	82.9%	84.4%	84.6%	88.9%	85.3%	78.6%	83.7%
Computer Lab	15.4%	13.9%	17.1%	15.6%	15.4%	11.1%	14.7%	21.4%	16.3%

Overall. A majority of students preferred to complete online evaluations on their own time rather than as a group in a university computer lab. Some 84.6% chose "on own time," compared to 15.4% who preferred the group lab setting.

Program Level. At the program level, a greater percentage of undergraduate students favored completing evaluations on their own time rather than as a class in a computer lab, although the difference between graduate and undergraduate students was only 3.2%. Some 86.1% of undergraduates preferred the choice option, compared to 82.9% of graduate students.

Gender. The gender difference in location preference was a mere 0.2%, with females expressing a slightly stronger preference than males for completing the evaluation on their own time as compared to in a computer lab with their class.

Program Level and Gender. When gender and program level were looked at together, location preferences showed a similar pattern to earlier responses, although, unlike earlier responses, the effect of program was less than the effect of gender. Although all students preferred completing evaluations at their own convenience, and although over 3% more undergraduate males than females reported this preference, over 5% more graduate females preferred this option than graduate males. Male graduate students, more than any other group, prefer to complete the evaluation as a class in a computer lab.

Comments Favoring Completion on Own Time.

(a) I am more likely to write specific comments while I am relaxed at home instead of in a lab and anxious to leave.

(b) The issue of confidentiality is also raised when the whole class goes to the computer lab. It is easy to see what is written on nearby computer screens. I do not want to be concerned that fellow students may be reading portions of what I write in a confidential evaluation. Even fleeting access or the possibility of access is unfair to me and to the professor.

(c) I would feel uncomfortable and constrained to keep my eyes glued to my screen to avoid the appearance of glancing over at what someone else is writing.

(d) I had one class that spent time to go to the computer lab to fill out an evaluation. It was a significant waste of my time. I should not have to pay almost $900 per class and then be required to spend two hours of it evaluating the instructor.

Comments Favoring Completion during Class Time in Computer Lab

(a) It would be very helpful for the professor to allow time in the computer lab for all students to complete the survey. This way I won't forget and there will be other classmates present to help if need be.

(b) I have found that if the whole class does not go over together and complete surveys, I go home and forget to do it.

Overall, of the 128 students who indicated they preferred taking the online evaluation in a computer lab together as a class, 13 students made comments in the area set aside for this question, and 7seven of the comments pertained directly to the location question. Four students said they will forget to complete the evaluation if they do not do it in class, one said she needed help completing it, one said she would not find time to complete it outside of class, and one said he was not motivated enough to compete the evaluation outside of class.

The survey results indicate about 85% of students polled would rather complete the evaluation at a time of their choosing. Fifteen percent is a significant minority, however, who prefer to complete the evaluation as a class in the computer lab. Male graduate students in particular, prefer to complete the evaluation as a class in the lab (21%). Only one male graduate commented on why he preferred completing the evaluation in the computer lab as a class and he wrote:

It is very difficult for me to motivate/remind myself to complete online course evaluations. I understand the effort to move towards a paperless process to save money and time, but it is much easier for me to complete the traditional paper evaluations in class.

All male graduate students agreed with the statement "I am more likely to complete it since we are already in class."

Nearly 24% of the students who have never completed the evaluation online prefer to complete it as a class in the computer lab, as compared to the 13% who have completed an online evaluation five or more times and prefer completing the evaluation in the computer lab. The comments from students indicate the whole class in lab option may help those who have never taken an online evaluation, female students who have had less experience with online evaluations, and male graduate students who feel they tend to forget to take the evaluation if the class does not complete it together.

Table 5: *Overall Format Preference (N=826)*

Format Preference	Overall Response	Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Within Program Level, Within Gender			
		Under-grad	Grad	Male	Female	Under-grad Male	Under-grad Female	Grad Male	Grad Female
Online	88.4%	92.5%	83.8%	88.7%	88.2%	93.3%	92.4%	82.9%	83.9%
Traditional	11.6%	7.55	16.2%	11.3%	11.8%	6.7%	7.6%	17.1%	16.1%

Overall. A majority of respondents expressed a clear preference for the online course evaluation format over the traditional format. When asked which delivery method was preferred, 88.4% of all respondents preferred the online evaluation format, compared to 11.6% who preferred the traditional format.

Program Level. Although students at both levels expressed a clear preference for online evaluations, 92.5% of undergraduates favored them, compared to 83.8% of graduate students.

Gender. Differences in format preferences by gender were far less, however, than differences by program. Although a greater percentage of males chose online evaluations, male preferences varied from female preferences by a mere 0.5% for each choice.

Program Level and Gender. Greater differences were apparent when gender and program were looked at together. Although gender differences alone varied by only 0.5%, the variation was closer to 10% when gender was combined with program level. Undergraduate males preferred online evaluations by 10.4% over graduate males. Undergraduate females preferred them by 8.5% over graduate females. Within programs, the two genders varied from each other by no more than 1%.

Comments Favoring Online Format. General comments made by students illuminate their preference for online formats.

(a) (With traditional evaluations), everyone just wants to get out of class so they bubble in anything and leave without making comments.

(b) (With traditional evaluations) People just fill in all above average ratings just to get it done.

(c) My feeling is that a lot of students simply fill in the paper evaluations and give a false picture of how the course was run. With an online evaluation you may have fewer students doing them, but they are students that are going to answer truthfully.

(d) In a computer world, it just makes more sense to do everything online.

(e) We are in a technological age. There is no reason not to utilize this as much as possible.

(f) I prefer to use the computer.

(g) I hate filling in those stupid bubbles with my name, student id number, etc. That is a waste of time.

Comments Favoring Traditional Format. Of those who preferred traditional paper evaluation, about 30% were students who had had no previous experience with online formats. Of all students who favored traditional formats, 100% agreed with this statement: "I am more likely to complete it since we're right in class."

The reasons students indicated for their choice of evaluation delivery format are further explored in Tables 6 and 7. Students were given a list of statements (such as "I like completing it at my own convenience"); see Appendix for complete list and asked to indicate which they agreed with. Students were also given space on the survey for comments addressing this question.

Table 6: *Reasons If Preference is for Online Format (N=724)*

Reasons for Online Preference	Overall Response	Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Within Program Level, Within Gender			
		Under-grad	Grad	Male	Female	Under-grad Male	Under-grad Female	Grad Male	Grad Female
Convenience	87.2%	88.2%	85.8%	85.0%	87.6%	87.7%	88.4%	81.0%	86.7%
Anonymity (typed)	58.1%	61.1%	54.5%	49.6%	60.2%	53.1%	63.2%	44.8%	56.8%
Privacy	54.4%	55.8%	52.4%	40.3%	57.5%	43.2%	59.0%	36.2%	55.7%
Time to Think	53.6%	58.3%	47.6%	48.2%	54.6%	55.6%	59.0%	37.9%	49.4%
Write More	49.6%	55.0%	43.0%	84.9%	87.6%	45.7%	57.4%	43.1%	43.2%
Doesn't Take Class Time	48.2%	46.0%	50.9%	49.6%	48.2%	44.4%	46.5%	56.9%	49.4%
Other	9.5%	9.5%	9.7%	8.6%	9.8%	8.6%	9.7%	8.6%	10.0%

Table 7: *Reasons If Preference is for Traditional Format (N=93)*

Reasons for Traditional Preference	Overall Response	Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Within Program Level, Within Gender			
		Under-grad	Grad	Male	Female	Under-grad Male	Under-grad Female	Grad Male	Grad Female
More Likely to Complete	94.6%	90.3%	96.8%	93.8%	94.8%	75%	92.6%	100%	96.0%
More Familiar with Format	36.6%	41.9%	33.9%	18.8%	40.3%	50%	40.7%	8.3%	40%
Hard to Get Online Access	30.1%	29.0%	30.6%	6.2%	35.1%	0%	33.3%	8.3%	36%
Can Ask for Help if Unclear	18.3%	22.6%	16.1%	12.5%	19.5%	25%	22.2%	8.3%	18%
Other	21.5%	22.6%	21.0%	25.0%	20.8%	50%	18.5%	16.7%	22%

Overall. Convenience was the first choice of those who preferred online evaluations; it was chosen by at least 87.2% of respondents. The next most common reasons, in descending order, were anonymity, privacy, and more time to think before writing the comments. These were all chosen by over half of respondents. Almost half of all respondents also said that they were able to make more comments when typing than when writing by hand, and almost half preferred online evaluations because they didn't take class time. "Other" reasons were added by 9.5% of respondents.

Although only 93 students preferred the traditional format, they were united in their reason. Almost 95% said that they were "more likely to complete" traditional evaluations, which are customarily delivered in the classroom on the last night of class. Other reasons included familiarity with traditional format, difficulty of getting online access, and ability to ask for help if questions are unclear. Interestingly, some 21.5% chose "other" as their reason, and some of the comments listed below will illuminate this choice.

Program Levels. Some differences in rankings emerged according to respondents' program levels, although the differences were not large. Both graduate students and undergraduates appreciated the convenience and anonymity of online evaluations, although graduate students, more than undergraduates, appreciated not taking class time to complete evaluations.

Among those who preferred the traditional evaluation format, an analysis of the response by program level showed similar preferences from both groups, although over 6% more graduates than undergraduates chose "more likely to complete" as their reason for preferring online evaluations. Over 6% fewer graduate students placed value on being able to ask for help than undergraduates did.

Gender. When analyzed by gender, males and females both chose convenience as the most common reason for liking online evaluations, with females showing a slightly stronger preference. Both males and females said they were able to make more comments when typing than when handwriting. The biggest difference was more females reporting a much stronger preference because of anonymity and privacy. Compared to males over 10% more females identified anonymity, and over 17% identified privacy as their reasons for preferring online evaluations.

Among those who preferred traditional formats, the spread between male and female was much greater than that between program levels. For example, 21.5% more females than males cited format familiarity as a reason for preferring traditional evaluations, and 30% more females than males said that getting online access was problematic.

Program Level and Gender. Within program levels and within genders, convenience was again cited most often, and especially by females at both levels. Between 10% and 19% more females at both levels also appreciated privacy and anonymity, whereas these aspects seemed less important to males. Privacy, in fact, was ranked last in importance by the fewest males at both levels.

Increased likelihood of completion was cited within both genders and within both programs as the most common reason these 93 students preferred traditional evaluations. Indeed, all 100% of male graduate students cited this as their reason, with other reasons cited by only 8.3%. Far fewer male undergraduates seemed to value likelihood of completion, however, with only 75% choosing it compared to over 92% in each of the other groups. A full 50% of male undergraduates chose "other."

Comments on Reasons for Online Preferences

(a) Don't have to worry about turning it in.

(b) Easier to click than fill in bubbles.

(c) You don't feel as if other students are waiting or watching to see if you have a lot of comments about the teacher or just a few comments. It's more private if you really have thoughts about a teacher you want to include.

(d) I feel that students are much more honest when doing evaluations online . . . I know that even though the teacher wasn't able to see the evaluations, I still was worried about it getting into his/her hands somehow. I hope we never go back to the bubble sheet!

(e) I still feel (online evaluations) aren't quite anonymous, though, because if I have something bad to say when the professor sees these he/she can still figure out who it was. So most of the time I don't type messages, I just do the check box part. I feel it is hard to be truly honest knowing the professor will see the evaluation.

(f) I am more thorough with my evaluations and am able to provide concrete examples of what I liked and disliked about the class . . . I found that I have more suggestions to offer with the evaluation being online.

(g) (Online surveys are) not as big of a problem with teachers forgetting about the evals until the last three minutes of class, and then forcing you to rush through them.

Comments on Reasons for Traditional Format Preference

(a) Online surveys are always posted during the busiest time of the semester (exams), and I usually don't have time to fill it out unless it's completed during class. Completing surveys during my own time is at the very bottom of my priority list even when I really do want to give my opinion on my class and professor.

(b) I don't have to take the time outside of my class, which I do not want to do.

(c) Computer input can be traced, and students know this. Online evaluation is not a secure channel, in my opinion. I am skeptical that my input could not be accessed.

(d) Although supposedly anonymous, online surveys have to be able to be tracked. A bubbled sheet allows more anonymity and more honesty.

(e) I prefer to complete evals on the bubble sheet because this way I know the responses cannot be linked to me. (In online surveys) I know that someone somewhere can connect my responses to my name. This has actually kept me from completing the course evaluation for two professors, but I would have completed them if they had not been online.

The comments students wrote indicate a variety of concerns with online evaluations, especially in the areas of anonymity. Students comments support previous research indicating that students write far more comments when the evaluations are online, and perceive their responses as more honest (Anderson et al., 2005; Dommeyer et al.,.2002; Donovan et al., 2006)

The next area investigates the relationship between students' experiences with competing evaluations online and their preferences for online or traditional formats. Does more experience competing evaluations online tend to alleviate students concerns and allow them to prefer this

method? Table 8 compares experience with completing online evaluations with preference for delivery format across program levels and gender.

Table 8: *Actual Completion of Course Evaluations Online (N=830)*

Number of Completions	Overall Response / Percentage	Between Program Levels		Between Genders		Preferences Within Program Level, Within Gender	
		Under-grad	Grad	Male	Female	Online Preferred	Traditional Preferred
0 times	68 / 8% 2	22.1%	77.9%	22.1%	77.9%	69.1%	30.9%
1-2 times	65 / 32%	38.1%	61.9%	15.9%	84.1%	83% 9	17%
3-4 times	227 / 27%	61.2%	38.8%	21.1%	78.9%	4.2%	5.8%
5 + times	270 / 33%	65.2%	34.8%	20.7%	79.3%	94.1%	5.9%

Overall. One area which intrigued the researchers was the difference in student responses based on familiarity with online evaluations. If students had used the online format to evaluate faculty extensively in the past (defined as five or more times), were they more or less likely to prefer the online format over the traditional pencil and paper? For students with no experience completing faculty evaluations online, which format did they prefer and why?

Inexperienced students. Sixty-eight student respondents, 53 graduate students and 15 undergraduate students, indicated they have never completed a faculty evaluation online. As shown in Table 3, 13% of graduate students had not completed an online evaluation, while only 3.5% of undergraduate students never had this experience. Survey results showed 69% of the students who had no experience with online evaluations still indicated they would prefer to complete faculty evaluations online rather than in the traditional bubble sheet format. The reasons for these students' choices were fairly consistent. The students felt rushed completing evaluations in class. Comments such as these were representative of this group:

(a) In the past when I have completed evaluations in class, it is always done in a rush, and there seems to be pressure to finish quickly.

(b) I like not feeling rushed to turn in the evaluations while in class. I like to take more time filling them out than most students.

(c) Less paperwork... I know it's the same exact thing, but it's seriously annoying to have to hand out those papers the last 10 minutes of class.

About 30% of students with no experience with the online format preferred the traditional format. One hundred percent of these respondents indicated agreement with the statement "I am more likely to complete it since we're right in class." Perceived barriers to online format are the inability to ask for help while completing the evaluation, the need to have consistent online access to complete the evaluation, and the lack of familiarity with the online evaluation format. Student comments were varied and interesting in this area, as indicated below:

(a) I don't like the --SU practice of not requiring students to take responsibility for their evaluations. Like other state universities I have attended, students should be

required to sign their evaluations if the evaluation is going to go beyond the professor. Online does not give me the opportunity to sign or take responsibility for my comments.
(b) I don't have to take the time outside of my class, which I do not want to do.
(c) I like the convenience of the Bubble Sheet in class. The main complaint I have is that both of my professors that offered the Bubble sheet passed it out in the last 5 minutes of class, giving no warning so I was unprepared. If it was not possible to stay late during that time to finish it, the eval would be done very poorly, which renders it useless.

Students with a great deal of experience with online evaluations. Two hundred and seventy students indicated they have completed the faculty evaluation online five or more times. Sixty five percent or 176 of these were undergraduate students, and 35% graduate students, again reinforcing the finding that online evaluations use appears more prevalent in undergraduate classes. This experienced group of students indicates that they would rather complete the faculty evaluations on their own time (87%) as opposed to in a computer lab with the entire class (13%). This is higher than students who have never completed an online evaluation; for these 76.5% would choose to complete the evaluations on their own time, but 23.5% would rather complete them in a lab with the whole class. It appears as if once students are comfortable with the format, they do not need the support of the instructor or whole class lab setting. Findings indicate the more experience students have completing faculty evaluations online, the more they prefer the online format. 70% of inexperienced students preferred the online format as compared to 94% of the experienced students.

Experienced who prefer online. Experienced students preferred the online format primarily because of convenience – 90% agreed that they like completing the evaluation when it is convenient to them. Fifty eight percent liked having more time to think before writing and liked the privacy and anonymity of online evaluations. Over half, 54%, indicated they can write more comments when they complete the evaluation online. Some of the student comments include:
(a) I hate filling in those stupid bubbles with my name, student id number, etc. That is a waste of time
(b) Teacher's can't alter the process or ask a "friend" to administer the evals and then give specific questions for you to answer in order to cover up the class' dissatisfaction with their teaching. That happened to our class last semester and we all were upset about how it was handled in the classroom. We left feeling like our right to voice our opinion was meddled with.
(c) There is less hassle, since a student must take the bubble sheets to the department office after everyone has completed the evaluations in class.
(d) I like that I can take it right away so my thoughts are right after completing the class. I think you get a more accurate response.
(e) When completing surveys in class, it seems all students are compelled to "do so quickly" as it is often handed to you right as you leave the class. On the other hand, on-line surveys, although my preference, can be frustrating if Blackboard is not functioning properly.
(f) I am more likely to write specific comments while I am relaxed at home instead of in a classroom and am anxious to leave.

(g) I am more thorough with my evaluations and am able to provide concrete examples of what I liked and disliked about the class by looking back at the work I have completed. I found that I have more suggestions to offer with the evaluation being online.

Experienced who prefer traditional. Students with a lot of experience with online evaluations, who prefer traditionally delivered evaluations, did not make as many comments. The one student (of the 12 who indicated this choice) wrote:

I know that it takes longer to code the data. I happened to be in a department's office that used the online format and they were giving the evaluations to the professors before final grades were due. I do not think that professors should see the evaluations until the grades are in!

Generally, experienced student responses agreed with the inexperienced students as 75% indicated they were more likely to complete the evaluation in class than online. As compared to inexperienced students of whom 43% indicated more familiarity with the traditional format, 32% of the experienced students liked the familiarity with the bubble sheet format. About the same (285 of inexperienced students as compared to 25% of experienced respondents) who preferred the traditional delivery format were concerned about online access. The biggest difference between the two groups was that the only 12.5% of the experienced students as compared to 24% of the inexperienced students indicated the fact that they could ask for help mattered to them.

Discussion and Implications

Several conclusions can be drawn from this research, though it should be replicated in other settings with other populations. In answer to the first research question, "Which evaluation format is preferred by students and why?" students clearly and overwhelmingly prefer to complete faculty evaluations online as compared to the traditional pen and paper format. This holds true regardless of program level, gender, experience, or any other factor looked at in this research. The percentage of students who indicated a preference for the online format was 88.4% overall, and depending on the subgroup, ranged from 82.9% (male graduate students) to 93.3% (male undergraduates).

The second research question was, "Are format preferences and reasons related to program level, gender, and prior online evaluation experience?" Format preferences are related to program level as a higher percentage of undergraduate students prefer online evaluations than graduate. Format preferences are not strongly related to gender as approximately the same percentage of male and female students prefer online evaluations, although a deeper analysis reveals minor differences in responses between male and females. Format preferences are related to students' prior experience with online evaluations, as students with more experience prefer the online format.

The survey results show more graduate students have never had the chance to complete an online evaluation (6% of graduate students as compared to 2.3% of undergraduate students), and 13.4% had never completed the evaluation online, as compared to only 3.5% of undergraduate education students. Forty percent of undergraduates had completed at least five online evaluations, compared to 23.2% of graduate students. Undergraduate students have had more opportunity and experience with online evaluations than graduate students, and this helps explains why 93% of undergraduate students prefer online evaluations as compared to 84% of graduate students.

When student experience with online evaluations is compared with student preference, the preference for online delivery increases as experience with this format increases. Of students

with no experience taking online evaluations 69.1 % prefer the online format, but as experience increases to three or more times, 94% of students choose the online delivery format. Conversely, 30.9% of students with no experience taking online evaluations prefer the traditional delivery format, but as experience increases this decreases to 5.8% of students who have completed online evaluations three or more times preferring traditional delivery.

The level of experience affects student's choice of location for completing the evaluation. When experience with online evaluations was looked at in relation to preference of location, some interesting trends emerged. Eighty seven percent of experienced students, those who have taken five or more evaluations online, prefer completing them on their own time, which is slightly higher than the overall student response of 85%. This compares to 77% of the inexperienced students, those who have never completed an online evaluation, who prefer to complete the evaluation on their own time. Students with even one experience move toward the average; 84% prefer to complete evaluations on their own time. A higher percentage of undergraduate students (86.1%) than graduate students (82.9%) favored completing evaluations on their own time rather than as a class in a computer lab. It appears that with increased familiarity, students do not need the support of going to the lab together, although some still prefer this as they feel they will forget to do the evaluation on their own otherwise, as shown by this comment from an experienced graduate male student:

> It is very difficult for me to motivate/remind myself to complete online course evaluations. I understand the effort to move towards a paperless process to save money and time, but it is much easier for me to complete the traditional paper evaluations in class.

In addition, 22% of undergraduate students who favor traditionally delivery of evaluations indicate the availability of help is one reason they prefer the traditional method. Graduate females also indicated the availability of help was a reason they prefer traditional evaluations. While experience with online evaluations tends to lead students to choose to complete them on their own, a sizeable minority of students experienced with online evaluations, and the more inexperienced students prefer to complete online evaluations in a computer lab or complete them in the traditional way in class, rather than on their own.

In terms of gender, some minor gender differences were revealed by the research. Undergraduate males have more opportunity (53%) and experience (44% report taking an evaluation online five or more times) than undergraduate females (43% had opportunity and 40% report taking online evaluations five or more times). Possible explanations include more males in such fields as science, math, and computers, and a greater use of online evaluations in these kinds of classes. It is also possible that male undergraduate students are more comfortable in taking online evaluations than females or graduate students when offered the opportunity. Graduate students results were much closer, revealing few differences based on gender between experienced students, and only a slight difference between inexperienced graduate students. This may be due to the fact the male and female students are taking the same courses as they are not separated by major at the graduate level.

There were other differences in student responses indicating why one delivery method was preferred over another. Female students, both graduate and undergraduate, indicate the anonymity and privacy of online evaluations were reasons they prefer them. Female students chose these reasons 10% more than male students. Graduate male students who preferred online

evaluations choose the reason "Doesn't Take Class Time" more than any other group (56.9% as compared to the average of 48.2%), showing this as a unique concern for this group. Some differences were apparent in the responses of students who preferred the traditional format for delivery of evaluations. Female students were far more concerned with the difficulty of gaining online access to the evaluations. Overall, 35.1% of female responses chose this as a reason for preferring traditional delivery as compared to 6.2% of males. No undergraduate males choose "Hard to get online access" as a reason and only 8.3% of graduate males choose this reason.

All levels, undergraduate and graduate, and both male and female students, were united in choosing the convenience of online evaluations as the main reason they prefer this format. For those who preferred the traditional format, "More likely to complete" was similarly the top choice (94.6%) for all levels and genders.

In summary, format preferences and reasons are somewhat related to program level, gender, and prior online evaluation experience. The most pronounced differences in responses occur at the program level, with 92.5% of undergraduates favoring online evaluations as compared to 83.8% of graduate students. Gender did not affect choice of format as much as other factors. Prior experience with online evaluations did affect the responses, as those with no experience with online evaluations were more likely to choose the traditional method, and students with more experience with online evaluations preferred online evaluations more.

A close analysis of student responses and comments help to answer the third research question, "What can we learn about improving student's experiences with faculty evaluations delivered online?"

Graduate professors appear to offer less opportunity for students to complete online evaluations, as 6% of graduate respondents have never had an opportunity to complete a faculty evaluation online. Possible reasons may be that more adjuncts teach graduate classes as compared to undergraduate classes, and are not familiar with delivering evaluations online. Graduate students may be perceived as less technologically able by their professors, and thus unlikely to complete online evaluations, so they choose the traditional delivery method. Graduate classes more often take place on weekends and evenings when computer labs (in which to take the evaluations) are not available or perceived as not available. Graduate classes, far more than undergraduate classes, are offered off-campus, and computer labs may well be locked or non-existent in some of the locations where graduate classes are held. It is also possible professors who teach graduate classes have characteristics which cause them to stay with the traditional delivery method rather than offering the evaluation online, but whatever the reason, College of Education graduate students are offered fewer opportunities and have less experience with online evaluations as compared to undergraduate students.

Undergraduate students have opportunities to take online evaluations from professors in other departments or colleges, while graduate students usually take all their courses from the College of Education. Undergraduates are exposed to a greater variety of professors, and course experiences. For example, at the research site, there are no large lecture classes offered in the College of Education at either the undergraduate or graduate level. However, general education classes such as math and history classes are taught as large lecture classes and these classes often offer the faculty evaluation online, which increases undergraduates experience with online evaluations. The survey indicated the level of experience with online evaluations influences student preferences. Students who have completed more online evaluations prefer the online format at a higher rate (see Table 8). Graduate students have less opportunity, thus less experience, and are less likely to prefer online evaluations than undergraduates.

The college needs to make an effort to overcome these differences in experience and encourage graduate professors to offer evaluations online. Possible solutions to closing the gap involve better communication with off-campus locations to ensure a computer lab is available for the last class, training for adjuncts as to how online evaluations work, and further research to determine why graduate professors choose traditional delivery over online delivery of evaluations.

Graduate students need more support the first few times they complete online evaluations, and they need assurance their responses are anonymous. An explanation of the process (that the instructor cannot access the Blackboard evaluation course to see individual responses) is needed for graduate students. Graduate students also have more concerns about access to the evaluations, and may be better candidates for a whole class lab experience. Graduate students may not use Blackboard as often as undergraduate students, and professors can help by showing them how to access their password to avoid situations such as this one:

A lot of people didn't know their passwords in order to get online to complete the evaluations. This was the case for me 1/2 times. I had my password at home, but couldn't remember it when we tried to do the evaluation in class.

Graduate students tend to be older and may have unique barriers such as the one described by a graduate student in this comment, "The font on the online evaluation was so small, it was unreadable in some of the questions." Professors who teach graduate classes need to address students concerns and offer them encouragement to offer online evaluations, so that more graduate classes begin to offer online evaluations.

Graduate students, particularly female graduate students, need to understand the only thing different about online and traditionally delivered faculty evaluations is the delivery format. They need to know that the survey is exactly the same otherwise, with the same questions and the same space for comments. They also need to know that student comments are typed to ensure anonymity before they are given to faculty. Student comments such as the following show students do not realize that the evaluations delivered online and traditionally are exactly the same except for the delivery method:

(a) I think that the traditional evaluations always offer you a place to write to about the professor or class and some on-line ones do not.
(b) Traditional bubble sheets provide a more personal level to suggest ways to improve the course and/or compliment a teacher's style.
(c) I can fill out more specific qualities of my professors instead of having "cookie cutter" responses.
(d) Typical bubble sheet evaluations are pretty general in the questions that you write responses to. I don't imagine that profs get that helpful of feedback. I think that online evals provide the opportunity for more OR more specific questions/feedback because people completing them have the opportunity to type responses.
(e) I feel the evaluations have a better chance of reaching those that need to read them.

It appears to take only one to two experiences for the student to feel confident enough to prefer to take the online evaluation on his or her own time. It is a good idea for a professor to poll his or her students, especially a predominantly female graduate class, for familiarity with online evaluations. If some of the students have never completed the evaluation online, it would

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be helpful for the professor to reserve a computer lab the last night of class, and take those who wish to go to the lab as a group, and help them complete the login and other steps needed to complete the online evaluation. If a choice is available, the professor should chose a lab in which students cannot readily see one another's screens, or one with enough computers so that students do not have to sit side by side, as some students did not like the idea that other students could see their computer screens when filling out the evaluation. This could be the best option for students, as it would solve the problem of students who do not know how to complete the evaluation without help, while also allowing those who choose to return home rather than go to the lab to complete the evaluation on their own. It also may reduce the problem of students forgetting to complete the evaluation.

Students need to understand the importance placed on faculty evaluations and a time frame established for completion that meets student needs. Students need to know what professors control and what they do not, as illustrated in this student comment:

> Profs need more training on how to set up course evaluations online. Many times
> I have been rushed to submit the evaluation by the deadline because it was not
> made available on time because the prof didn't know how to set it up.

At the research site, course evaluations are set up by the Blackboard administrator, not individual professors.

Often evaluations are made available for the same time period for an entire campus or department, and an individual professor has little say in when the online evaluation will be available to students. In other cases, professors can choose when the evaluation is made available on an individual basis. Student comments follow:

> (a) Course evaluations should be done at the end of the last class day. I've had
> classes that it was completed at the beginning of the day and wished I could have
> added comments pertaining to that class session. I've also had evaluations that
> needed to be completed BEFORE the end of the last class day. The deadline for
> evaluations needs to be after the class is completed, not before.
> (b) I don't like have a short window of opportunity to fill them out. For one class
> I forgot to do it and was not able to get back into the system to complete it.
> (c) Needs to be more time available for turning them in online.

The above student comments indicate student dissatisfaction with the timing of evaluations. It may be helpful for the school or department to decide on the availability and timing of evaluations as a group to standardize the dates the evaluations are available. Students need to be informed when the evaluations will be accessible (perhaps by email) and if this time period is always the same students will know what to expect each semester. The online evaluation of faculty can be a successful experience for more students if simple steps are taken to increase student's understanding of the processes involved and if student comments about the process are solicited and addressed in an ongoing manner. A possible solution is to have a space on the evaluations for a comment about the evaluation process, so students can continue to give input in this area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, students overwhelmingly prefer completing faculty evaluations online. The most significant reason students give for not preferring the online format was that they were more likely to complete the evaluation when given to them in class. Other barriers to preferring online evaluations, such as greater familiarity with the traditional format, lack of online access,

and inability to ask for help, can all be easily overcome with a small amount of practice and experience. The more experience students have with online evaluations the more they prefer this format, leading to more students over time preferring to complete online evaluations of faculty online.

It is noteworthy that no student indicated he or she prefers online evaluations because the online format made it easier to avoid completing the survey. On the contrary, many students wrote that they felt they could give richer, more thoughtful, and more useful feedback when they completed the online evaluation on their own, at a time of their choosing, with no time constraints. If our students are willing to expend more effort to help us do our job better, it makes sense to offer them every opportunity to complete student evaluations of faculty online.

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Appendix
Student Survey**:** Course Evaluation Preference

1. Student Status:
Undergraduate
Graduate

2. Student Gender:
Male
Female

3. Questions:
a. Opportunities: Approximately how many classes have offered you the opportunity to complete the evaluation online?
0 classes
1-2 classes
3-4 classes
5 or more classes

b. Completions: How many times did you actually complete an evaluation online?
0 times
1-2 times
3-4 times
5 or more times

c. Location Preference: Where would you prefer to complete online course evaluations?
I prefer to go to the computer lab with the whole class to complete them.
I prefer to complete them on my own time

d. Format Preference: Given the choice between online evaluations and traditional bubble sheet evaluations, which do you prefer?
I prefer the online format.
I prefer the traditional bubble sheet format.

e. Online Preference: If you prefer ONLINE course evaluations, check any of the following reasons. (Check as many as apply--but only if you prefer ONLINE evaluations.)
I like the privacy of online evaluations.
I like having more time to think before I write.
Online evaluations don't waste class time.
I like the anonymity (no handwriting).
I can write more comments when I type.
I like completing it at my own convenience.
Other (please specify)

f. If you feel satisfied with your answers above, please check "Go to End of Survey" and click Next.

g. Bubble Sheet Preference: If you prefer TRADITIONAL bubble sheet course evaluations, check any of the following you agree with. (Check as many as apply--but only if you prefer TRADITIONAL evaluations.)
It's sometimes hard to get online access.
I'm more familiar with bubble sheet format than online format.
I am more likely to complete it since we're right in class.
I can ask for help if I don't understand something.
Other (please specify)
h. You have successfully completed this survey. We appreciate your help with the study. If you have any other comments, please provide them below