Dear Colleagues,

In consideration of the successful campus-wide implementation of Blue, UAF’s new electronic system to poll students’ opinion of teaching, I wish to thank all those who have been involved in its development, realization and administration. Both the System Administrator and I have received a significant number of positive comments, demonstrating a heartening level of satisfaction. The recent publication of the results, however, has also sparked some concerns with respect to system effectiveness. In particular we have received comments from users who experienced difficulties in interfacing with Blue, were not positively impressed by the report layout, or expressed their disappointment for the outcome of the survey in general.

With the determined support of the Marketing and Communication Department, a dedicated website is being prepared which will provide updated information for instructors and students to operate Blue, how to access it, historical reports of students’ evaluation of teaching and much more. Technical questions will be addressed through the website, which is expected to be ready with sufficient advance on the spring evaluation.

Instructor report layout will also be revised for the future rounds of evaluation keeping into consideration the suggestions submitted by some of you. The Electronic Course Assessment Implementation (ECAI) committee as well as the Provost’s Office welcome further comments on the subject, and are open to implement changes with the goal of rendering the reports a source of insightful and actionable information.

In this note I wish to address more extensively two areas of concerns: low response rates, and perceived decrease in ratings as compared to paper-based evaluations.

I have been searching through the literature to gain a more objective perspective on the issue of response rates. As expected by many, and as I indicated in prior communications, moving from a paper-based system to an electronic one is accompanied by a drop in numbers. Online survey response rates vary significantly among institutions. Some institutions reported response rates as low as 20% (Nulty, 2008), while others were more successful by achieving response rates that were greater than 70% (Kulik, 2009). Thus, it might appear surprising, but with an overall 41.3%, UAF is not far from the average response rate of ~50% reported in the literature. Moreover, this first result is aligned with published data indicating that the decrease in response rate at the beginning of a system change, and without incentives, is in the order of 20-25% (Nulty, 2008). Therefore, the results obtained in the fall semester at the institutional level, once compared with other universities or colleges, can be considered acceptable.

Nevertheless, a lower-than-desirable response rate has sparked fears that only those at the extreme ends of the range of satisfaction with a course have taken the trouble to participate. The increased unpleasantness of certain typed comments, to the point of becoming disrespectful, may have reinforced fears that unhappy students are more likely to participate than those satisfied with a course. For some faculty, electronic evaluations also raised flags from a procedural standpoint, as evaluations would move from the classroom to an uncontrolled environment. These aspects are considered important in that a significant portion of the faculty view student course evaluations as a high stakes game used by department chairs and deans to determine faculty reappointment, promotion, and tenure decisions.

The ECAI committee has been working from day one with the awareness that the change of the system to poll students’ opinion of teaching would be less than flawless. A report by Ravenscroft and Enyeart
(2009) and a work by Hartshorne (2011) have indicated that the issue of low (or lower-than-desirable) response rates can be addressed. The institutions surveyed in these studies adopt a variety of approaches (email communications, making the evaluation a small part of the course grade, early grade access to student who completed the survey, publishing some of the results) to incentivize students’ participation.

The ECAI committee is in the process of selecting appropriate strategies for UAF to increase students’ involvement at the institutional level. However, you can help make a difference in response rates and in the value of the written comments, in particular for your own course. At institutions where evaluation is taken seriously by the administration and the faculty, students can feel that their feedback matters, and respond accordingly. The relationship between student and faculty member is highly personal and individual, and plays the biggest role in a student deciding whether to evaluate. Indeed, if faculty value course evaluations, educate the students on how they are used, and emphasize to students that their input, whether positive or negative, will be taken seriously, a positive effect on response rates is apparent (Gaillard et. al., 2006). Constructive, informative, and encouraging instructor-student engagement around the course evaluation process is very important in maintaining or improving response rates (Norris & Conn, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Anderson et. al., 2006; Ballantyne, 2003).

Right in your hands, you have the power to increase response rates, and to prompt more useful and respectful feedback! You can help UAF make more of a difference in this area, knowing that UAF will be there every step of the way, with an increased effort in technical support and advertising. In the upcoming website some ideas will be indicated to help you encourage your students towards evaluating.

In this regard, we wish to stress the role of the evaluation website as an important tool to foster a culture in which course assessment and teaching evaluation are perceived as crucial components of institutional development. This is why we encourage you to share your experience with assessment of your courses, your story of implementing students’ suggestions or maintaining what was appreciated, and how evaluations have helped modify and hone your teaching, regardless of the polling system adopted (paper or electronic). We want to populate the evaluation portal with testimonials that highlight the impact of students’ opinions on teaching improvement, because no technicality or trickery can incentivize students to provide feedback better than saying, and showing, that we care!

Thank you for your support in this important change.

Truly Yours

Andrea Ferrante, Chair
Electronic Course Assessment Implementation Committee