Introduction

Student evaluation is an important tool in higher level learning environments. A shift in higher education from physical classrooms and course evaluations towards more web-based learning environments and evaluation methods has posed challenges for many educational institutions, including the University of Wisconsin-Consortium (UWC) MBA Program, which has experienced lower than desired response rates to its web-based course evaluations. A modified evaluation format increased response rates from 42% to 48%.

Objectives

- To better understand the causes of low response rates
- To explore strategies to increase future response rates

Literature Review

Researchers and educators across the globe have begun to study the effects of an online learning environment and assessment procedures have on course evaluations. Researchers have found that online evaluations may result in the following:

- Decreased response rates
- Non-response bias due to lower response rates
- Increased quality of responses to open-ended questions

Methods

This study consisted of two parts:

I. Exploratory phone interviews with UWC MBA Program students
II. Test of a modified evaluation format

I. Implementation of Phone Interviews

Exploratory phone interviews were conducted with 25 randomly selected UWC MBA students who completed online courses during the first term of the 2009-10 academic year. Students were asked about their experiences with their course evaluations. These findings were used to modify the evaluation instruments in an attempt to increase future response rates. Results from these interviews were self-reported which may have created some social desirability bias.

Key results from the exploratory student phone interviews are contained in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Selected Findings from Phone Interviews](image)

II. Test of Modified Evaluation Format

The modified course evaluations allowed students to respond to one of the following:

1. I am satisfied and do not wish to complete the full evaluation.
2. I am unsatisfied and wish to complete the full evaluation.
3. I am satisfied and wish to complete the full evaluation.

Nine sections during the 2009 fall semester and 12 sections during the 2010 spring semester participated in the study with a total enrollment of 532 students. Half of the students in each course were given the original evaluation format, while the other half was given the modified evaluation.

Analysis

As shown in Table 1, a total of 42% in the control group of students responded to the original evaluation. A total of 48% in the treatment group responded. A breakdown of how the treatment group responded follows:

- 44% selected Response 1 (Satisfied – do not wish to complete)
- 2% selected Response 2 (Not satisfied – wish to complete)
- 54% selected Response 3 (Satisfied – wish to complete)

Response rates of the treatment group were 6% higher than response rates of the control group. Although statistically nonsignificant (p=.096) this response rate was in the desired direction.

![Table 1. Modified Evaluation Response Rates](image)

Conclusions

- Students reported during exploratory phone interviews that a simplified course evaluation format would be desirable and would likely increase their likelihood of completing evaluations.
- Modifying the evaluation format to include a shorter evaluation format may not have high statistical significance, but it does have managerial significance, increasing response rate by nearly 6%.

Recommendations

Short-term recommendations:

- Continue testing the modification of the course evaluation within the University of Wisconsin-Consortium MBA Program. An increase in sample size for future testing to achieve a finding of greater significance.

Long-term recommendations:

- Explore the strategy of offering incentives for students to complete the evaluation, such as the following:
  - Give extra credit points for the course
  - Require evaluation as course assignment
  - Withhold grades until completed

As supported by a number of researchers and studies, these incentives are likely to help increase response rates; however, these strategies do have shortcomings:

- These approaches compromise students' beliefs that they will maintain anonymity from course instructors.
- Many faculty/administrators do not believe extra credit should be offered for evaluations, nor do they wish to withhold points or grades for non-completion.

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