

University of Toronto Stays on Course with Blue[®] Course Evaluations



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Professor Carol Rolheiser,
Director of the Centre for Teaching Support &
Innovation (CTSI), University of Toronto

CLIENT:

University of Toronto

NO. STUDENTS:

~80,000

CHALLENGE:

A highly complex environment required flexibility and innovative thinking to meet diverse, university-wide needs.

SOLUTION:

Blue course evaluations

BENEFITS

- Customizable course evaluation forms allow for thorough evaluation of teaching and learning
- Quick generation and dissemination of reports
- Comprehensive reports with summary and detailed, comparative data
- Integration with Blackboard for multiple points of access to evaluation forms and reports

If there is one word that best describes the recent successes behind the automation of course evaluations at the University of Toronto, it's "collaboration".

Established in 1827, the University of Toronto is a vibrant and diverse academic community. It includes 80,000 students, 11,500 faculty appointments, 150 librarians, and 6,000 staff members across three distinctive campuses and at many partner sites, including world-renowned hospitals.

MOVING COURSE EVALUATIONS ONLINE

A few years ago, as one feature of a new Course Evaluation Framework, the University of Toronto decided to move from paper to online course evaluations. They had several reasons: in particular, students were asking for more environmentally sustainable practices and there was a clear need for higher quality data and reporting.

But in such a diverse and complex environment, implementing online course evaluations is no small task.

"The University of Toronto has the most complex organizational structure in Canada, and it is consistently in the top university rankings internationally," said Professor Carol Rolheiser, Director for the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation (CTSI) and Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning.

"When it comes to course evaluations, we need to be able to reflect the wide range of teaching and learning contexts that exist across the university," she said.

To determine next steps, the university assembled a working group, which was chaired by three Vice-Provosts. The working group drew on a comprehensive literature review of two team members, Pamela Gravestock and Emily Greenleaf, carried out an internal environmental scan, consulted broadly across the university, and developed a new Course Evaluation Framework that included moving course evaluations online. With those steps in hand, they set about looking for the right technology partner.

BLUE MAKES THE GRADE

After thoroughly examining several providers, University of Toronto selected Blue from eXplorance.

“We were very selective in choosing a vendor, because we knew we wanted someone who could partner with us as part of a larger, collaborative process,” said Marden Paul, Director of Planning, Governance and Assessment at the University of Toronto.

During the vendor selection, eXplorance scored highly in several ways.

“Blue is designed specifically for online environments – it’s not just a system that was based on paper forms and translated into digital,” said Paul. “And it has a strong focus on Higher Education.”

Some of the key technical aspects of Blue’s online course evaluations include ease of integration with current in-house systems, flexibility in course evaluation form creation, and a user interface that is fully accessible to all end-users, regardless of physical abilities.

“Equity and inclusion are fundamental to our work here at U of T,” said Rolheiser. “Students from every background, including those with disabilities, are supported by policies and resources that help create an inclusive environment and one that actively works against discrimination.”

“Accessibility was at the top of our list of requirements,” added Paul. “In fact, we include accessibility requirements in our RFP’s from our software vendors.”

ROLLOUT AN ITERATIVE PROCESS

The university began its implementation process in the fall semester of 2011 with select departments in the Faculty of Arts and Science and the entire division in the Faculty of Nursing.

Their plan is a phased rollout across the university over several years, working closely with divisional contacts as they progress.

“At this point we have the Faculty of Nursing, the Faculty of Arts and Science, U of T Mississauga, U of T Scarborough, and the Faculty of Social Work using Blue. This fall 2013, the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Information are joining the implementation,” said Rolheiser.

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The phased approach has played a large role in the success of the project—it has permitted the team to work collaboratively with each division to build in strategies to evaluate each stage of the implementation process and to then implement changes (if necessary) for the next phase.

“We learn something new from each phase,” said Dr. Cherie Werhun, Course Evaluation Support Officer at CTSI and one of the primary system administrators of Blue at U of T. “It’s been a continuous improvement process. We continue to build strong working relationships with all divisional contacts. They help us not only get the information we need to populate Blue, but to verify the information and the timelines.”

During the phased implementation, eXplorance has been there to provide the required support.

“For any issues that have come up, we always feel like all hands are on deck at eXplorance to solve it,” said Rolheiser.

Dr. Werhun concurred. “There have been late evenings where we’ve had to work collaboratively to solve an issue. Because of the unique nature of the U of T learning environment, we have so many different projects, so many different timetables – and in the end eXplorance always stepped up to help meet our needs.”



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Dr. Cherie Werhun, Course Evaluation Support Officer at CTSI

TEAMWORK RAISES RESPONSE RATES

Collaborative efforts across the university have helped realize response rates that exceed typical reported levels when universities first make the switch to online. “We’ve had very proactive communications around response rates,” said Rolheiser. “We know from the literature that the more you engage students and faculty around the course evaluation purposes and process, the better the response rates will be.”

Some of those communication efforts include posters, a student-produced online video, a website, just-in-time information slides in the larger classrooms, and instructor reminders to students, to name a few. Instructors are encouraged to use the data they’ve gathered for their own development.

“We work strategically with our divisions and with our departmental contacts to ensure the message about the importance of course evaluations reaches our students,” said Werhun.

As part of the communications efforts, Dr. Werhun also makes full use of the features available in Blue, including response rate monitoring and automated reminders to students who haven’t completed their course evaluations.

“During the last three or four days of an evaluation session, I send a message to each of the institutional senior leaders letting them know what their current response rates are on that day,” she said.

“Students who haven’t completed their course evaluation forms receive targeted messages through email as well as Blackboard,” she said. “I think that’s been really helpful in raising response rates.”

The committee can’t compare response rates to those from the days of paper-based forms, as the available data from the paper-based processes were incomplete. However, they can say that they are very happy with the current results using the new online system.

“We are very pleased with the response rates,” said Dr. Werhun. “When we look at the averages across divisions, we haven’t seen a significant decline that concerns us.”

COURSE EVALUATION FORMS TO SUIT EVERY NEED

To meet the needs of the various divisions and departments, eXplorance created customizable evaluation forms in Blue that could be adjusted according to those needs.

“We created a four-layered framework to capture the different contexts and priorities,” Rolheiser said. The course evaluation framework consists of eight institutional core questions, an option for divisions and departments to add their own questions. Instructors can also add a small number of their own questions for each course for formative purposes.

Instructors can select from a bank of questions or submit their own to the central course evaluation team for inclusion in the question bank. Each course evaluation form can thus have a maximum of 20 questions.

From this framework, Blue issues two separate reports: a summative report that goes to faculty members, deans, and chairs, and a formative report that only instructors see.

“The formative report gives instructors an opportunity to work on their development in an anonymous environment,” Rolheiser said.

This flexibility in the system also helps accommodate the different pedagogical and logistical needs of the departments and divisions.

“Every department has a slightly different form based on their teaching and learning priorities, and every division has different timelines,” she said. “Blue lets us work with each unit individually, as required.”

POSITIVE RESPONSE FROM STUDENTS

To gauge student reaction to the new online forms, Dr. Werhun added some questions to the evaluation forms regarding the new medium. The response was very positive.

“We’ve collected data from approximately 10,000 students in order to assess their reactions after having used Blue,” she said.

“We asked them to compare the paper to the online approach on a 5-point scale, from ‘A lot worse’ to ‘A lot better’. Around 70 percent of students reported that online was better than paper. Much of the qualitative comments revolve around time – they feel less pressured to complete the form quickly within the last day of a course given the two-week window that Blue supports.”

“This is a really positive result for our community, especially given the huge sample size.” To further improve the student experience, eXplorance has added another feature to

Blue, called Feedback View. This feature gives students interactive access to historical evaluation data through an institution's portal or Learning Management System.

"Feedback View allows students to search course evaluation results by course, by instructor, and by department from the Blackboard portal," said Paul. "It shows all the different results per course, the evaluation summary, statistics, and the answers to all the questions in aggregate for each course section."

"It's really fast, and very accessible," he added.

RICH REPORTS PLEASE FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

The committee wanted sophisticated reports to share with faculty and administrators, and worked closely with eXplorance to ensure they could get the most from their collected data.

The first page is an Executive Summary page, and contains each institutional, divisional, and departmental course evaluation question which its associated mean and the standard deviation.

The following pages contain details on how the summary statistical information was derived: response distributions for each item, how many students responded per each response for each question, along with the mean, the median, the mode and the standard deviation.

This is followed by the qualitative comments section, and finally, the comparative data section. The comparative data shows the instructor's results compared to the divisional mean and the unit or departmental mean.

"Instructors love these reports," said Werhun. "With the richness we're seeing in the qualitative data, we can have reports that have very detailed feedback. Students are taking the opportunity to really reflect on their learning experiences in their courses." For administrators, eXplorance is currently working on a report that will provide the data the university needs for processes that involve assessing teaching, such as tenure and promotion.

"With this new report, we'll be able to pull several years worth of data. This will be huge, because we'll be getting comprehensive, reliable data, at little additional cost, that will serve individual and institutional needs" said Rolheiser.

A+ SUPPORT FROM THEIR VENDOR

The working committee for implementing online course evaluations at U of T has been working hard to ensure a collaborative working environment, and it shows. They are very pleased that eXplorance shares the same spirit of collaboration.

"I've been dealing with lots of vendors for decades now and very rarely have I met a company so willing to work things through with us," concluded Paul.

"Even if it means working overnight or through holidays, eXplorance has been willing to make the changes that make our system work best for us. And always without complaint. They've been terrific in being responsive, and it's been a pleasure working with them."

