Hawai'i Pacific University Sees Stellar Response Rates for Course Evaluations

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Dr. Marco Sausa,
Director for Institutional Effectiveness

CLIENT:
Hawai'i Pacific University

NO. STUDENTS:
~6,700

CHALLENGE:
Paper processes were time-consuming and provided inconsistent data while basic online course evaluation tools drew inadequate response rates

SOLUTION:
Adopting a software solution that used a centralized approach to produce reliable data in a quick and timely manner, while using Early Grade View Incentive features to improve response rates

BENEFITS

- Achieved high response rate for university-wide implementation – fall 2013 (75% for on-campus & 73% for online courses)

- Decreased reporting time from 3-6 months to 2 weeks

- Provided easy access to forms and reports from Blackboard Learn™ portal

- Increased response rates with Early Grade View Incentive feature

Hawai'i Pacific University (HPU) offers more than 4,000 courses to students of all backgrounds, from near and far, including those needing distance learning options. For course evaluations, managing such an extensive course catalog, spread over 14 terms and parts of terms, can be tricky.

"Our paper processes used to require an enormous amount of manual labor," said Dr. Marco Sausa, Director for Institutional Effectiveness at HPU. "Information for course evaluation reports used to take three to six months to be collected, analyzed and delivered. And for our online courses, response rates were very low, around 20-30 percent."

Paper processes also provided uneven cross-university data that was difficult to mine for analysis. "For contract renewals, promotions, and supporting teaching excellence, we needed more consistent course evaluation data," Sausa said.

FACULTY COMMITTEE LAUNCHES INITIATIVE FOR COURSE EVALUATIONS

HPU's Faculty Assembly Academic Policies Committee launched an initiative to improve assessment of online courses and decrease the time course evaluation reports were being received by faculty and departments. In January 2012, the Faculty Assembly voted to have all course evaluations be part of contract renewal and promotion, and asked that the reporting process be improved. A comprehensive multi-year initiative was co-led by Dr. Marco Sausa and Ms. Lia Woo, former Assistant Director of the Center for Advancement of Innovative Teaching. The initiative consisted of the formation of two groups: the Pilot and Implementation Working Group and the Communication and Advertising Working Group. More than 50 faculty members, staff, students, various offices and departments throughout the university collaborated on this project.

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In spring 2012, the course evaluation format and questions were revised, and additional assessment questions were added for online courses. Sausa and Woo conducted an extensive literature review of online course evaluations, analyzed best practices, and compiled a vendor requirement list based on their research and input from deans, faculty, staff, and students. Next Sausa and Woo evaluated 16 vendors closely, viewing multiple demonstrations of the product and report samples, and conducting extensive reference checks. By summer 2012, a Vendor Selection Committee was assembled, which included 20 faculty, staff, and students to choose the best product from the short list. They selected Blue from eXplorance by unanimous decision.

"We chose Blue for its superb design, strong reporting features, excellent training and customer service, proven integration with Blackboard Learn, and an 'Early Grade View Incentive' feature which allows students who have completed their course evaluations to view their final grades early," Sausa said.

"Students loved the visuals and the ability to access Blue course evaluations from the Blackboard Learn portal," he added. "It's very immediate, which is important to them."

BLUE HANDLES COMPLEX TERM- AND SESSION-LENGTHS

In fall 2012, HPU launched their first pilot project to test the new online system. They started with approximately 1800 student course registrations in the School of Education and the Department of Communication. The evaluation form included the newly revised questions and optional questions from instructors, though the 'Early Grade View Incentive' feature was not yet ready for release implementation.

"Faculty had the option to add up to two individual questions to each of their own course evaluations, which they could create themselves or select from a newly created question bank."

Implementation of the new system was quite complex, as HPU has many course offerings and terms. "Last year we had a total of 22 terms and parts of terms including three-, four-, five-, six-, eight-, ten-, twelve- and fifteen-week sessions throughout the calendar year," he said. "We have now reduced this to 14, including the military and MBA programs."

"Mandy Bohnet, Academic Systems Analyst for Institutional Research and Academic Support, and the lead survey administrator for the project at HPU, and Andrea Leung, Lead for Middleware in Informational Technology Services, did a wonderful job getting everything set up in Blue, with assistance from eXplorance when required."

Response rates for the first project were 41 percent to 52 percent. The only communications that took place for this project was a one-page flyer and the emails that were sent directly to students from Blue asking them to complete the course evaluations.

EARLY GRADE VIEW INCENTIVE HELPS BOOST RESPONSE RATES

The next phase of the project took place in spring 2013. For the second pilot project, they added the College of Nursing and Health Sciences to the population using Blue. This increased the number of student course registrations invited to complete the course evaluation from 1800 to 4900. They also implemented the Early Grade View Incentive program.

Blue is integrated with HPU's student information system, Banner® by Ellucian. With this integration, Blue automates many of the processes around course evaluations, including such features as withholding grades until students complete all their course evaluations.

"The research literature reports that an Early Grade View Incentive can substantially influence response rates, which is what we saw here as well," said Sausa. "The only change to this phase of the implementation was the addition of the Early Grade View Incentive, and we saw response rates jump from 43 percent to 85 percent."

For the Early Grade View Incentive program, students were asked to complete the course evaluations for all their courses in the final two weeks of the course, before the final exam period. If they completed the task, students could see their final grades one week early. Final grades were available to all students seven days later. The Early Grade View Incentive did not affect student access to financial aid, veterans' benefits, athletic eligibility, reporting of grades to military services, or the Veterans Administration.

"We worked extensively with our Student Government Association leaders and student focus group on this," he said. "There was much discussion about how long final grades should be held."

As the program was new, and word was still spreading among students, HPU offered an additional grace period. If students failed to complete all of their course evaluations on time, they could consult the website for instructions on how to lift the grade hold, and complete all their course evaluations to participate in the Early Grade View Incentive.

HPU observed some interesting statistics on student behavior around course evaluation completion times.

"About 50 percent of students completed their course evaluations the two weeks before the final exam period, and an additional 25 percent during the additional grace-period," he said. "There was no significant difference in how students graded their courses, whether they completed the course evaluation before or after their finals." The Student Government Association has recently voted to include the final exam period as part of their 'end-of-term student course evaluation'.

COMMUNICATIONS ESSENTIAL TO INCREASING RESPONSE RATES

While the second phase of the pilot project was underway, the Communication and Advertising Working Group collaborated to create the resources they would need to spread the word.

"The Communication and Advertising Working Group created all the communications materials, and was able to get most of it produced in-house," he said. "Student creativity was amazing. They created videos for faculty and students, which explained not just how to complete the new course evaluations but why it's critical to making immediate improvements to our learning environments and teaching effectiveness."

The working group created a website (http://www.hpu.edu/courseevaluations/), FAQs, handouts, and reached out through social media. The University Provost, deans, and faculty chairs also sent out emails and memos encouraging students to take advantage of the new online system.

75% RESPONSE RATES FOR ENTIRE UNIVERSITY

In fall 2013, the university was ready to go live with Blue for the entire university, including online courses. They launched their communications program, notifying students of the Early Grade View Incentive program. They also added another feature to boost response rates further: a Blue window from the Blackboard Learn university portal, where students can access Blue course evaluations directly from Blackboard.

Their hard work paid off. The response rate was 75 percent for on-campus classes and 73 percent for online courses.

"It was extremely successful across the entire university," said Sausa. "I don't think we would have gotten this many responses if it hadn't been for the Blackboard integration."

"A critical component of this program was student involvement," he said. "The students helped develop the questions, pick the system, made decisions regarding the system implementation, and created and implemented the university-wide Communications and Advertising campaign. They didn't feel like this was something that is being imposed on them. They were co-leaders in the change process."

ACCESS TO CRITICAL INFORMATION

Students and faculty are giving positive feedback about the new system, particularly the access from the Blackboard Learn university portal.

"Both faculty and students have been very pleased about the access to Blue from Blackboard," he said. "Faculty highlighted the easy access to their reports directly from their Blackboard portal."

"They're also very happy that they're now getting reports in just two weeks."

HPU has extensive reporting requirements and produce 25 reports every semester that summarize and display results.

"We also created a special report for each college dean that highlights the top five overview questions from the course evaluations and response rates. The report allows us to quickly identify the top and bottom 10% so we can help struggling faculty and match them with faculty who are successful in specific areas," he said.

HPU also likes the wealth of qualitative data that has been coming in with the new system.

"The composite comments report is outstanding," he said. "We have 1000 pages of comments, which are all tagged automatically by professor and course. This means we can do sub-analysis, and view them by graduate versus undergraduate, online versus on-campus courses. We can even search through comments by keyword."

"These comments are important to our faculty and our executives. They read them carefully."

EXCELLENT SUPPORT FROM ACROSS TIME ZONES

HPU has been very appreciative of the support they've received from eXplorance.

"Being in the Hawai'i time zone, we don't always get the support we need from some of our vendors," he said. "eXplorance has consistently come through for us, from the large issues to the small."

"The support desk always got back to me in a very timely manner," confirmed Mandy Bohnet.

With excellent response rates, a solid data set, detailed reports, and timely delivery of results, HPU has seen a sea change in their course evaluation data gathering and analysis. eXplorance has been pleased to act as a supportive partner throughout the transition.

"This is a wonderful relationship between eXplorance and HPU," Sausa concluded. "From my perspective, the company has been incredible. Without Blue, we wouldn't be able to do what we're doing now. We are really excited about the possibilities going forward with the Blue product and our new partnership with eXplorance."