University of Louisville Transitions to a New Era in Course Evaluations with Blue®

> "We would not have opted for a full roll-out if we didn't have eXplorance as our technology partner. They helped us make this possible by taking care of the technology, so we could take care of what we had to do."
>
> Robert Goldstein,
> Associate University Provost, Office of
> Academic Planning & Accountability

CLIENT:
The University of Louisville

CHALLENGE:
A large university with a decentralized organizational structure needed to move varying, mostly paperbased methods of course evaluations onto a single, online platform

SOLUTION:
Blue course evaluations, a web-based solution designed specifically for evaluating courses and made to integrate easily with in-house data and systems.

BENEFITS

- Estimated to have saved over $100,000 in recurring labor and resource cost savings, year over year

- Went from pilot to fully online in one calendar year

- Maintaining >60% overall average in response rates

- Received outstanding technology support throughout transitional period

- Reduced time to create and distribute course evaluation results from months to weeks

Introducing new technology is not just a matter of writing up specifications and installing the necessary components—it almost always involves a cultural shift, as well.

When the Office of Institutional Research and Planning at the University of Louisville started discussions on moving paper-based course evaluations online, they knew skilful management of this shift would be vital to the project's overall success.

"Some of the academic units expressed concern over declining response rates if we changed from paper to online forms. We listened carefully and tried to come up with creative solutions to address different priorities across the university," says Robert Goldstein, Associate University Provost, Office of Academic Planning & Accountability.

"And to do that, we had to ensure we had the right technology partner."

ADOPTING SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

The university had several reasons to make the shift: the online solutions have far less environmental impact, students had been asking for an electronic alternative, and the cost savings potential was substantial.

But deep concern over declining response rates remained nonetheless. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning was under pressure to ensure they implemented the right technology and processes to assure reluctant stakeholders.

A LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP

After assessing several vendors, U of L selected Blue course evaluations from eXplorance. The university had a three year relationship with eXplorance as advanced users of their Blue surveys application. U of L was so pleased with that experience that they extended their commitment, implementing Blue course evaluations for their online course evaluations.

"I truly believe we could not have
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For such a large and complex project, they selected Blue to provide the technology platform they were looking for, but they also relied on eXplorance to get the support they needed through this massive undertaking.

"Having eXplorance as our technology partner allowed us to focus our time and energy on developing a comprehensive marketing and communications plan, which was critical to the project's overall success," says Robert.

"I truly believe we could not have achieved everything we have achieved without them. Their service and support is outstanding, and they are an informative liaison between Institutional Research and IT departments."

A SMOOTH TRANSITION

The Office of Institutional Research ran a pilot project for the online course evaluations during the fall semester, with six of the total 11 academic units conducting course evaluations, such as the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Public Health and Information Sciences, and the J.B. Speed School of Engineering.

Some academic units were initially sceptical about changing from paper to online evaluation forms, but the pilot projects helped prove they could work.

Indeed, the pilot was such a success that the following semester, the academic units who participated in the pilot projects wanted to extend the use of Blue evaluations.

"We hadn't planned to do a pilot project in the spring semester, but when we received feedback asking for another, we were more than happy to oblige," says Becky Patterson, Director, Office of Institutional Research at the University of Louisville.

THE RESPONSE RATES THEY WANT

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning gave high marks to the response rates they saw from both pilot projects. "Overall, we had response rates of 64.5% for the first pilot, with some of the units coming in at over 70%," says Becky.

"Our second pilot released over 5,200 email invitations to online course evaluation forms for approximately 300 courses, and got an overall response rate of 61.7%. We were very pleased with these results."

By the fall semester the next year, course evaluations for all 11 academic units across the university went fully online. Over 82,000 emails containing links to an online course evaluation form for approximately 7,000 courses were sent, and the shift away from paper-based forms was complete.

OUTSTANDING BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE COURSE EVALUATION

The extensive marketing and communications plan put in place was a fundamental reason for these high response rates and the overall success of the project.

The Office of Institutional Research put a great deal of effort into launching campus-wide awareness campaigns to "get the word out" on the new online course evaluations.

"We ran a huge marketing and communications campaign to promote this transition and to explain the reasons for it," Robert explains.

Students, faculty, and staff got involved in the campaigns, with the final results showing off a lot of young talent. "We made spoof-advertisement videos for student audiences and faculty/staff audiences using students and faculty as actors—these were very funny and ended up going viral," he says.

"We explained why student feedback was important to the university as a whole, and how the students would benefit. We used just about every media: signs, posters, the student portal, a Facebook page, YouTube videos. It was a lot of fun, cost effective, and it was very effective in activating student and faculty engagement."

SAVING OVER $100,000 PER YEAR

Cost savings and reduction of environmental impact with the new system are considerable now that paper forms no longer have to be printed, distributed, and collected.

"We identified both the direct and indirect costs of administering paper evaluation forms, including the costs of scanning and maintaining scanning equipment," says Becky.

"We calculated savings of at least $100,000 a year, every year, in labour and resource costs after the first two years of operation."

"We're also now able to get results distributed in a matter of weeks, not months."

ENSURING A GOOD END-USER EXPERIENCE

Another important aspect of introducing new technology is ensuring a good end-user experience. Here too, eXplorance was able to provide just what the university needed.

"eXplorance always had prompt responses to our support calls and inquiries, which allowed me to field a lot of questions from our academic units quickly," says Becky.

"They provide outstanding service, which helped make the transition smoother."

"When anything compromises Blue's performance—no matter whose side it's on—eXplorance is more than willing to help out. They are very persistent problem-solvers," adds Robert.

"This was extremely important to us because if you go out into the field with anything less than optimal performance, you shoot yourself in the foot."

Students enjoy the online platform, especially as most are comfortable with communicating in this medium.

"Students felt they could have complete anonymity with the online forms—while they have always had complete anonymity in their responses, the online platform helped many students feel they could be more honest," says Robert.

"It also lets them complete the evaluation on their own time, which is important to them."

NO LACK OF INGENUITY

Even though they are seeing encouraging results, Robert and his team continue to seek ways to improve processes and find creative ways to solve challenges.
"We are constantly refining the process," says Robert.

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"For example, some academic units still wanted to keep evaluations in class on the last day of class. They're now able to do this, but using pervasive Wi-Fi and mobile applications instead of paper."

They're also adding future enhancements to Blue course evaluations and instructional technology for increasing response rates, such as integration of Blue with the university portal and integration with the Blackboard Learn™ platform.

"This important integration will help increase response rates as it provides another direct link for students to access their course evaluation forms," Robert says.

MEETING IMPORTANT STANDARDS

Disabled students can also look forward to being able to use Blue course evaluations forms, since they are compliant with section 508 of the American Disabilities Act (ADA), making them fully accessible to all students.

This is particularly important for universities, since under Title III of the ADA.

"No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity."

"We are required to be compliant with ADA standards, and the fact that eXplorance has already issued a compliant solution shows just how well they understand educational needs," says Robert.

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning persists in its quest to continually improve the quality and quantity of student feedback.

"U of L's accreditation standards require us to provide evidence of continuous quality improvement, and Blue is an integral part of our institutional effectiveness efforts," says Robert.

"We anticipate the enhanced reporting features will enhance our ability to provide the documentation we need to demonstrate compliance with all relevant accreditation standards."

A STRONG PARTNERSHIP

For this university, eXplorance has clearly been a valued partner in this shift to new methodologies.

"Without the collaborative partnership we had with eXplorance, this transition to online evaluation forms would have been much harder than it was," Robert says.

"I can say without a shadow of a doubt that having them as a partner allowed us to be as successful as we were."

"The time it used to take to manage the online course evaluation system every semester placed an incredible burden on the Office of the Associate Dean. Many times individual reports were only released in the middle of the next semester, not providing faculty the opportunity to take suggestions from students and make improvements in a timely manner.

With the new eXplorance course evaluation system, we are able to create standard surveys each semester, link them to the PeopleSoft enrolment system and invite students personally to complete the course evaluations. Reports are created in a much more timely fashion, and faculty receive reports very soon after the end of the semester—enough time for them to take comments from students seriously and to implement changes in the next semester.

Administrators and program directors have access to the online reports of their faculty, providing needed information to them in a timely fashion. Due to a better personal invitation system, together with reminders to students as well as due to students experiencing the improvements, the course evaluation response rates have gone up from 40% to over 70%. The eXplorance Blue system has made our office much more functional. I am forever grateful!"

- Anna Faul, PhD., Professor, Associate Dean Academic Affairs, Kent School of Social Work