

The University of Minnesota Centralizes Course Evaluations across 5 Campuses with Blue®



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Thomas E. Dohm, Ph.D.,
Director, Senior Psychologist, Office of
Measurement Services

CLIENT:
University of Minnesota

LOCATION:
Minnesota, United States

NO. STUDENTS USING BLUE:
~65,000

CHALLENGE:
UMN had to look outside their homegrown systems for a more reliable and manageable solution that will allow them to centralize course evaluations institution-wide.

SOLUTION:
Blue course evaluation software

BENEFITS

- Consolidates course evaluations across all University campuses into one system
- Accommodates paper and online course evaluations
- Supports the pay, promotion, and tenure process and policy
- Seamlessly integrates with all IT systems

The University of Minnesota (UMN) ranks among the most prestigious institutions in the United States and is the only research (R1) university in the state of Minnesota.

Recognized globally for excellence in education and scholarly research, UMN caters to more than 65,000 students and 4,000 faculty members at their main campuses in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) – with additional campuses in Crookston, Duluth, Morris, and Rochester. Additional courses are taught at over 150 high schools throughout the state, along with fully online courses and study abroad sites around the world.

With thousands of classes taught by an award-winning faculty (faculty members have won Guggenheim Fellowships, MacArthur Fellowships, and Nobel Prizes), UMN has a centralized policy for end-of-course feedback. Since 1993, the University had been using a homegrown course evaluation system built and maintained in-house to their exacting specifications. A web-based data collection tool was later added through their central IT department in 2003.

Using a legacy system required the University to update and add functionalities as their needs grew and requirements changed.

"We'd been adding functionality for a decade to the web-based data collection," comments Daniel Glover, Developer 2, University of Minnesota. "Our systems were built specifically for the needs we had, when we had them, and we realized that the additional functionalities that our people were requesting were going to be expensive."

In 2013, the University made the decision to switch to an off-the-shelf course evaluation solution that will be able to meet their evolving needs.

"Our hardware had reached their end of life and we didn't feel that we had the resources to maintain them internally. So we thought that we would look for a less expensive solution."

NEED ANALYSIS CALLS FOR A CENTRALIZED SYSTEM – BLUE FITS THE BILL

Campus leaders at the University of Minnesota kept their focus on the future of course evaluations – with emphasis placed on the operational needs of a large decentralized university.

"We were trying to centralize course evaluations through one system," says Thomas E. Dohm, Ph.D., Director Senior Psychologist, Office of Measurement Services. "We have five campuses and at the time our legacy system was only used in the Twin Cities for all units except the seven academic health colleges."

These excluded colleges were Health, Dentistry, Veterinary, Nursing, Pharmacy, Medicine, and Public Health. "They were using a system called CourseEvals and other campuses were using other solutions," he continues. "Because we were consolidating across the University into one system we wanted to ensure that it could handle multiple course evaluation processes."

After a competitive RFP, managed by the Office of Measurement Services, the University selected Blue from eXplorance as the product that best fits their needs.

A SOLUTION THAT ACCOMMODATES PAPER AND ONLINE EVALUATIONS

The University of Minnesota has a very large paper course evaluation administration across all its campuses. Achieving operational excellence meant that the solution they chose would enable them to retain both paper and online forms, and had a way of integrating both results.

"The biggest selling point for us was Blue's ability to integrate paper and online; it performs that function very well," offers Glover. "In the past, we had been pulling our online data from the homegrown course evaluation system into our homegrown paper collecting system and sending out paper reports."

Using a split approach, Blue addresses the University's hybrid course evaluation needs. Whatever the split, the system easily combines paper and online results into powerful integrated reports.

"We've sort of flipped our previous model on the head with Blue and inverted it," Glover continues. "Now we take our paper and plug the data into Blue and get the reports to everyone when they need them."

ACHIEVING AGILITY THROUGH BLUE'S INTEGRATION CAPABILITIES

To ensure that the Blue implementation made the most of their IT investment and did not compromise progress to date, the University recognized the need for integration with their existing systems.

"What I've been impressed with is that to make a system like Blue work at a university of this size it has to really integrate well with the other systems that we are pulling data from, like PeopleSoft as well as our Learning Management System, Moodle," says Dohm. "We worked with the Blue support staff to ensure that the way it interfaced with other systems at all our campuses makes the whole process seamless to the user."

As a Blackboard and Moodle partner, eXplorance has significant experience in integrating Blue with both systems. Through the Blue Portal Integrator (BPI) they've developed a best-in-class integration that streamlines the end-to-end user experience through automation, accessibility, and ease of use.

"What has changed is that we're getting more efficient use with Blue – better bang for the buck," he continues. "We are now able to do things in larger ways than we had done before. The whole university has a more efficient and smooth course evaluation process as opposed to what we've had in the past."

Glover further adds, "Our central IT staff had been doing a lot of support for implementing the online data collection. Now they are primary doing end user support only. A lot of implementation time in our office has decreased and we've enabled a richer end user experience and broadened the base of use."

"Over time we developed a closer relationship with our own IT department", Dohm concludes.

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A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT STAFF THAT SERVES THEIR REAL NEEDS

Implementation of Blue began at the University of Minnesota in fall 2013 and eXplorance provided personalized services and support at every stage of the process.

"Early on Blue had difficulty with the size of our campus. It was taking well over 12 hours to process all of our reports that first semester," Glover recalls. "The eXplorance support staff was logging in daily to help manage that process while their development team was feverishly working to get a faster solution. In the end the product development team worked out the problem."

Today, Blue is completely flexible and scalable and can support large scale centralized and decentralized evaluations with ease. eXplorance's ongoing support at UMN also led to product updates that has improved Blue's functionality and optimized its performance.

"When we first implemented Blue it didn't have the spreadsheet exporting function for reporting," he continues. This function would allow faculty member to export their evaluation results to a spreadsheet application for further analysis. "They were able to add that in and it has helped maintained some reporting continuity from our end."

The excel spreadsheet export is now one of Blue's most competitive functionalities. It was a first step towards instructor controlled data analysis and the coveted faculty dashboard – an important feature that will be available in September 2017.

A SYSTEM BUILT FOR SCALABILITY AND PARTICIPATION

The University still has a large fraction of paper course evaluations and is in the process of loading more sections into Blue. Currently, there are over 13,000 class sections in the system - many with multiple instructors.

"Eventually, they'll be twice as many sections using Blue because of labs and recitation sections which the university's policy is currently sort of ambiguous on," says Glover. "So while we're getting data for about 13,000 courses in a calendar year the system is actually keeping 2-3 times that number."

Although the response rates before and after the Blue implementation has been about the same, the University is seeing some positive results.

"We see a little bit of an increase in response rates that I can primarily attribute to our being able to use the Blue plug-in for our Course Management System (CMS) that pushes notifications out to the class level," Glover continues.

Notifications are sent through the Blue plug-in to the students' CMS login page or the landing page immediately after login.

"We're actually able to send Blue notifications even if the course isn't using the CMS system and doing web-based data collection instead," Dohm adds. "We found that students are responding immediately, so I think that's been another big win from using Blue."

STANDARDIZING PAY, PROMOTION, AND TENURE PROCESS

As Dohm explains, "Before Blue there were three or four measures that were being used for course evaluations. Since faculty members who get tenure in a system campus can also apply for jobs here at the Twin Cities, we needed to have one common measure."

A required element of UMN's policy for pay, tenure and promotions decisions, Blue helped standardize the University's course evaluation process. Data is now more easily accessible and is even being used by other units on campus to drive faculty development.

"Results are used by the Center for Education Innovation," adds Glover. "They work with faculty members who perhaps have lower scores on their evaluations to help them improve their teaching."

The center uses the results from Blue to support faculty development by providing high quality, coordinated instructional support services to staff members.

"Then our team works with that center to develop several work books for the questions we have on the students rating of teaching," Glover continues. "If you have a low score we look at the concrete things you could be doing to improve that. We basically link up individual items on the instrument with interventions if you're not doing well."

CHANGING POLICY TO GIVE STUDENTS ACCESS TO RESULTS

Driven in part by Blue's flexibility, the University of Minnesota rewrote its policy a year ago to allow general publication of course specific results from evaluations.

"The Faculty Senate decided that by taking out some of the self-reporting student demographics and focusing on the course items we can open up evaluation results to the general student population," says Glover.

This initiative largely seeks to aid students as they select courses for future semesters by making the results available for their consumption when they start registering.

"In the past the University had an opt-in option for instructors to allow their student to see results but the participation rate was very low - about 1%," he adds. "Now, the students are getting something back from their ratings that they can use."

DEBUNKING MYTHS

People often assume that with a large R1 university like UMN, the focus is on research and therefore the teaching cannot be that great.

"That is a myth that Blue helped us disprove," Glover offers. "Based on the ratings we gathered our teaching is quite good compared to smaller colleges. We have the Blue support services that was right there making it work for us to thank".

The University has an average freshman retention rate, a key indicator of student satisfaction, of 92 percent.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE TOGETHER

From the above, it is clear that the relationship between eXplorance and the University of Minnesota will go a long way.

"eXplorance was willing to listen to us and help with features that our clientele required," Glover says. "Many of the big items that our people have been asking for has also been put into their development cycle."

A company that values long term relationships with their stakeholders, eXplorance is always considering their needs and views and strives to always remain responsive from product development to support.

"From my perspective I look at our relationship with eXplorance in two ways," Dohm adds. "One is the quality of the product and the support that's given to the product. That includes how responsive their technical staff were in working with us for some of the solutions that's specific to a very large university like ours. The second part is that I see Blue not just as a software to be implemented here on campus; I see it as an organization-wide change in terms of how people look at things. So in the process of building all the relationships you need to make this a success on campus, I appreciate very much the leadership they have at eXplorance."

Both Glover and Dohm will be attending and presenting at the 2017 Bluenotes Americas conference – an annual gathering of Blue users – in Louisville, KY.

"We always have a presence at the Bluenotes user conferences," Dohm concludes. "This year we'll be giving a presentation as well as taking part in a panel discussion with the University of Toronto. We enjoy being part of the user group community and watching it grow."

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