



## **Progress Review of the University-Wide Course Evaluation System: Updated Report for 2007 Summer Session II Pilot**

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### **Introduction**

This report describes the status of the University-wide, on-line course evaluation project at the University of Maryland. Coordinated by the Offices of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment and Information Technology, the universal instrument has entered its second phase of testing. Our primary focus at this point in time is the functionality and usability of the new technology developed to administer evaluations. Several technical problems (i.e., e-mail glitches and technology outages) were uncovered during the 2007 Summer Session I pilot. Although OIT worked quickly to address these issues in time for the Summer Session II pilot, students' lack of familiarity with the project and no official incentives for participation still appear to have significantly reduced the SSII evaluation return rate (40.8% overall). Feedback on the new technology system from students participating in the pilot, plans for further testing and improvement of the instrument, and implementation approaches are presented below.

### **Project Background**

- At the request of students, the University Senate established a Task Force on Course and Teaching Evaluation in 2005 to investigate the implementation of an on-line, campus-wide course evaluation system which would allow students to view select evaluation results.
- The recommendations of the Task Force and plans for the on-line system were presented to the University Senate in April, 2006 by an implementation committee. It was determined that each course evaluation would contain a set of universal questions, and could be supplemented by questions from colleges, departments, and/or individual instructors. Students who participated in their course evaluations would be able to view the aggregate results to a sub-set of universal items online.
- The Offices of Information Technology (OIT) and Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment (IRPA) were tasked with coordinating the development and implementation of the University-wide course evaluation system. OIT began the open-source development of this new technology during the 2006-2007 academic year with direction from IRPA.
- In Fall 2006, IRPA also established the University Course Evaluation Advisory Committee, an ongoing committee with representatives from the colleges (appointed by the Deans) and the original implementation committee. This committee will periodically review the plans for the course evaluation system and its results, and comment on the decisions that will have to be made as the system is developed.
- As of Fall 2007, a Course Evaluation Liaison has been named within each college or school to serve as IRPA's regular point of contact during this transitional period and for the ongoing implementation of the University-wide system. This person will have the most current knowledge about the new system and will be familiar with the nuances of the system and process related to individual college or school needs.

## **Piloting the Instrument**

In the fall of 2006, IRPA began piloting the University-wide course evaluation items approved by the University Senate. Our goal for this first stage of the pilot was to get a better understanding of how the questions themselves were functioning. A college with a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate courses (ARCH), a college of graduate-only programs (CLIS), and two undergraduate programs (HONR and WMST) agreed to participate. Students involved in the Fall 2006 pilot were asked to comment specifically on items which seemed unclear, were hard to answer, or did not seem to apply to them. IRPA examined the psychometric properties (i.e., reliability and validity) of the universal set of items at this time as well. Several minor changes to the original item wording were made based on the results from the fall pilot and the advisory committee's feedback. To review a copy of the final report, please visit IRPA's informational website ([https://www.irpa.umd.edu/Assessment/crs\\_eval.shtml](https://www.irpa.umd.edu/Assessment/crs_eval.shtml)).

Although IRPA originally hoped to start testing the new system during the spring semester of 2007, the product was not ready to pilot with students. Instead, staff members in OIT and IRPA conducted a number of smaller tests utilizing various components of the system as they were developed. As a result of these investigations, we were able to catch and repair several problems before we prepared to test the system with students.

In the second stage of our pilot (2007 Summer Sessions I & II), we used the new on-line technology for the first time to administer the revised questionnaires to UM students. The goals of the summer pilots were to investigate the effectiveness of the new technology system developed to administer the on-line course evaluations, and to determine the stability of our original findings across this new mode of administration once the quantitative data are available. Although the system itself is still in a developmental stage, many of its main components could be tested during the 2007 Summer Session pilots. Students involved in this stage of our piloting were asked to describe any problems they may have encountered accessing, completing, and/or submitting their on-line course evaluations.

With assistance from the Office of Extended Studies, a set of six-week Summer Session I sections were approached by IRPA to participate in the 2007 Summer Session I pilot. A total of 350 course sections across eight colleges (ARHU, BMGT, BSOS, CLFS, CMPS, EDUC, HLHP, and UGST) met the necessary requirements and agreed to participate in the Summer Session I pilot. We achieved a 40.7% return rate with 2378 out of a possible 5841 evaluations completed. Several technical problems were uncovered as a result of this pilot. Based on feedback from participating students, IRPA believes the majority of issues affecting the SSI return rate can be classified into the following categories: E-mail glitches, technology outages, difficulties logging into the system, lack of familiarity with the project, and no official incentives for participation. Strategies for improving the response rate in the future, plans for further testing of the instrument, and implementation approaches are presented in our progress report. This progress review can also be found on IRPA's informational website.

After the SSI pilot, OIT worked quickly to correct the problems associated with the e-mail glitches and technology outages in preparation for the SSII pilot. A total of 250 course sections across ten colleges (ARCH, ARHU, BMGT, BSOS, CLFS, CLIS, CMPS, EDUC, ENGR, and HLHP) met the necessary requirements and agreed to participate in the Summer Session II pilot. Please note courses with fewer than five registered students were excluded for confidentiality reasons. After discussing the project in detail with each of the college representatives, IRPA notified the instructors of these courses about the pilot via e-mail on Thursday, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007. We sent an e-mail announcing the availability of on-line course evaluations to all students enrolled in these courses on Wednesday, August 15<sup>th</sup>. We also sent an e-mail to students on Monday, August 20<sup>th</sup> reminding them to complete their evaluation(s) if they had not yet done so. The administration period lasted approximately one week, and evaluations closed on Thursday, August 23<sup>rd</sup>. A total of 1841 out of a possible 4506 evaluations were completed for a 40.8% return rate.

## Student Feedback on the Course Evaluation System

We informed students participating in the summer pilot that UM was testing the new technology system designed to administer on-line course evaluations. To aid the development and improvement of this system, we wanted to hear the students' opinions and reactions. Respondents were asked to comment specifically on any technical difficulties they may have experienced accessing, completing, and/or submitting their course evaluations. We probed for this information in the e-mail notifications as well in case students were not able to access the evaluation form.

Based on e-mail feedback from students, the majority of participants who were unable to access the evaluations did not know how to log into the system with their directory ID and password. Several visiting students indicated they had never used their directory ID before. Some students confused their UID with their directory ID, while others forgot the password associated with their directory ID. Once we directed these students to our Help Page, nearly all were able to log into the system and complete their evaluations. For example, one student stated *"I think you ought to remind summer students to set up their directory IDs when you sent out the reminders about the evaluations. I come from another college and forgot that I needed to set up my directory ID. The help link solved the problem, though."* A few students also indicated that they had not been checking their official University e-mail account regularly; these students were not able to access their evaluations because they did not open the e-mail notifications until after the evaluation period ended.

The vast majority of respondents said they did not experience any technical difficulties accessing and completing their course evaluations. Many individuals noted that the evaluation process *"went smoothly,"* and that the new system was *"easy"* and *"efficient."* A small number of students indicated that the evaluation system did not appear to be compatible with their browser, or that it took a long time to log into the system and/or load the evaluation template. Several respondents noted that the direct link to the evaluation template provided in the e-mail notifications did not work for them. These students had to follow the alternative set of directions also provided in the e-mail to successfully log into the evaluation system. OIT believes these rare compatibility issues were the result of individual system settings, and not widespread technology issues. For example, one student was not able to open the evaluation form on her computer at work because her employer had limited internet access to a number of pre-authorized sites.

Additionally, most students providing feedback stated that they preferred the on-line course evaluations to their WebCT or in-class counterparts. For example, one respondent said *"I liked this a lot better than the usual course [evaluations,] keep these around,"* while another declared *"Out of all of the evaluations completed, this is my favorite!!!!"* Students valued the privacy and flexibility of completing the evaluations on their own time outside the classroom. Several respondents appreciated the fact that on-line evaluations do not take away precious class time towards the end of the semester. Others noted that they were better able to prepare their responses without time restrictions or pressure from their peers. A few students even said they were pleased to see the University taking advantage of technology instead of *"wasting paper."*

Several students, however, indicated that there were a few aspects of the new system which caused them some frustration and/or confusion. A number of students noted that, although the form overall was visually pleasing, the arrows associated with different response options did not always align properly with the radio buttons; as a result, these students had to *"double-check"* to make sure they marked the response they had intended.

Also, via e-mail, a few students expressed a desire to log back into the system to change their responses. It seems these students submitted their evaluations before they realized they had misinterpreted the response scale direction (e.g., marked *"Strongly Disagree"* when they intended to mark *"Strongly Agree"*) or

mistakenly evaluated the wrong course (e.g., provided responses for ENGL101 while completing the CCJS100 form). Please note that the system does not allow students to return to the evaluation form once it has been submitted to change their answers. Because these students were concerned their evaluations would negatively affect their instructors, we informed them that their responses could be removed from analyses if they wished. This function was only feasible due to the nature of the small-scale pilot.

Lastly, students could not submit an evaluation unless they answered all the non-textual items; after a student viewed the “warning” message that one or more non-textual items had been left blank, all of the individual’s answers were erased when the person returned to the evaluation form. This experience was the most common frustration highlighted by the pilot respondents. Several students said that they had provided lengthy, thoughtful responses to the open text items, and that it was quite annoying to have to repeat all of their work. Respondents commenting on this issue requested a “Save Answer” option or suggested that the system “remember” their responses if they are asked to return to the evaluation form.

### **Project Plans for Fall 2007 and Spring 2008**

IRPA and OIT are currently working to investigate and resolve the student concerns emerging from the 2007 summer pilots. Since many students noted their frustration with returning to a blank template after viewing the warning that their evaluations were incomplete, OIT will be changing the appropriate system settings to ensure this problem does not occur during future administrations of the instrument. In response to the student requests to change answers after an evaluation has been submitted, IRPA and OIT decided to develop a “Confirm Submit” screen. Once students click the submit button at the bottom of the evaluation form, a screen will appear asking them to confirm their responses. The responses they selected will be displayed, along with the course number and instructor name. If students are not satisfied with their responses for any reason, they will have the option to return to the evaluation form and revise their selections. We hope the incorporation of this screen will prevent students from submitting responses other than the ones they intended.

In Fall 2007, IRPA and OIT will be conducting a third, large-scale pilot of the instrument. Our primary objective for the F’07 pilot is to assess the functionality and usability of the system by administering the universal questions across all courses at the University. Several components of the system cannot be adequately tested until the “load” or demand on the server and technology is increased (i.e., piloting with several thousand course sections instead of several hundred). Colleges, departments, and/or instructors may elect to run their own “shadow systems” during this transitional period to address specific evaluation needs, as the system cannot accommodate multiple levels of questions at its current stage of development. Assuming the evaluation process goes as planned, IRPA and OIT intend to generate on-line reports displaying the F’07 summary results for each course. Students completing all of their evaluations during Fall 2007 will be able to access the results to aid their Spring 2008 course selections.

Then, in Spring 2008, IRPA and OIT intend to conduct a fourth pilot utilizing the fully-built technology system. Decisions related to the administration of the Spring 2008 pilot (e.g., timeline, scale, participants) depend on the success of the Fall 2008 large-scale pilot and the completed development of the hierarchical module by the programmers at one of our partnering institutions. We hope to pilot the hierarchical component of the system in a few colleges by allowing colleges, departments, and/or instructors to add their own questions to the evaluation templates. Again, we will administer the universal questions across all remaining courses at the University not piloting the hierarchy component. The experiences of those participating in this phase of the pilot will help determine necessary alterations and improvements to this new module of the technology system. Once any potential glitches in the system have been caught and repaired, and the usability of the system is deemed adequate, the multi-level course evaluations can be applied campus-wide. Summary evaluation results for Spring 2008 will also be displayed online, along with the Fall 2007 aggregate results.

OIT and IRPA are prepared to closely monitor and address the evaluation response rate to help reduce the potential for non-response bias and ensure the results are representative. We are working to publicize the project to various constituencies across the campus (including students, faculty, and administrators) so that they can better understand the goals of this University-wide course evaluation initiative and how the project will affect them directly. It is our belief that once the project is well-known to participants, the response rate will improve significantly. IRPA is currently implementing its public communication plan and designing training sessions to build awareness of the course evaluation initiative and familiarize users with the new technology system. As a part of this process, for example, we are stressing to students the importance of checking their official University e-mail account regularly. We are also meeting frequently with the college liaisons and the advisory group in order to stay informed of and address any specific issues related to the system or evaluation process.