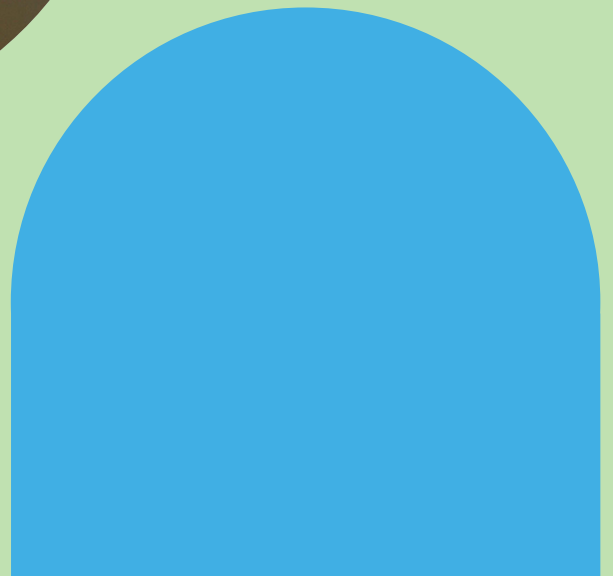
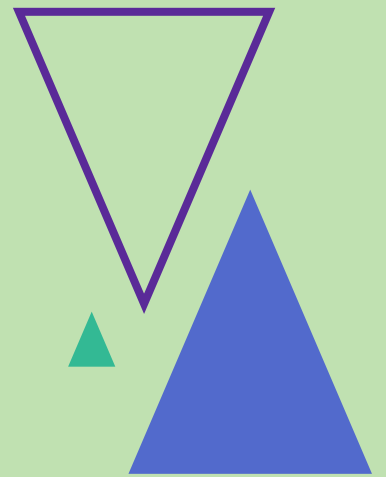


# The complete guide to course evaluations



Are course evaluations leaving you with more questions than answers?



**Get the insights you need to make student feedback the focus of your campus picture.**

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# The complete guide to course evaluations

As American academic and researcher Brené Brown said, “If we shield ourselves from all feedback, we stop growing.” Feedback is vital to improvement – and course evaluations are critical tools for colleges and universities to receive it.

Course evaluations serve as a structured way to collect feedback from students regarding their learning experience, the effectiveness of instructors, and the overall quality of a course. This feedback offers invaluable insight into areas that need improvement, ranging from teaching methods to curriculum content, and helps higher education institutions remain responsive to the evolving needs of students.

## Why higher ed institutions conduct course evaluations

The primary purpose of course evaluations is to gather essential data that can be used to drive institutional improvement. For professors, course evaluations offer insights into how they can better tailor their teaching methods. For instance, if students consistently highlight that certain materials or concepts are not clear, this feedback can encourage instructors to rethink their approach to teaching those areas. This feedback is also crucial in helping departments identify which courses are succeeding and which may need a closer review.

In the long run, this feedback aids programmatic improvements across an institution. Departments can use course evaluations to gauge how students are responding to various majors, minors, or elective offerings. If a course consistently receives poor feedback, the department may need to reexamine its content, instructional approach, or overall structure.



## Traditional methods of conducting evaluations

One of the most traditional forms of course evaluations is pen-and-paper evaluations. Students are given paper surveys to fill out during the last days of class, the results are manually compiled, and then the data is entered into static spreadsheets. While this method offers some insights, the data processing is tedious and prone to errors.

Homegrown systems have emerged as an alternative, but this software is often not user-friendly or secure, and it still requires significant manual work to produce useful data. Some institutions have adopted basic surveying software, but typically these tools are made to capture quick feedback – they aren't equipped to process large volumes of data and produce actionable insights.



## The impact of the 2020 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically shifted the landscape of higher education, and course evaluations were no exception. According to a 2020 survey of 700 higher education institutions, 87 percent of institutions prioritized student feedback as a way to gain insights into the curriculum and student experience. However, with the rapid shift to online and hybrid learning models, 51 percent of these institutions had to adjust their processes for conducting evaluations. Concerns arose about the context of the feedback in an online environment, with 61.5 percent of those institutions who modified their processes reporting that the sudden move to online learning impacted the collection and use of evaluation data.

The pandemic also exposed the limitations of paper-based and manual evaluation systems. About 20 percent of institutions that made adjustments had still been using paper-based methods, which were no longer feasible in a virtual learning environment.

And just over 7 percent reported they didn't have the time or capacity to conduct evaluations due to pandemic-related constraints. Despite these challenges, nearly half of the institutions surveyed planned to increase the frequency of evaluations and expand the types of feedback collected.





## How quality feedback changes everything

Accurate, timely feedback is crucial for institutional improvement. Without it, professors risk continuing ineffective teaching methods, and departments may overlook critical issues within their programs. Furthermore, if higher education institutions fail to adapt, they risk losing students, as evidenced by continuing school closures in recent years. Low enrollment rates and declining student satisfaction contributed to the closure of several institutions during and after the pandemic. This underscores the importance of having a robust course evaluation system in place to gather, analyze, and act on feedback before small issues escalate into larger, institutional problems.

**“If we shield ourselves from all feedback, we stop growing.”**

—Brené Brown



# Understanding course evaluations

Course evaluations are standardized assessments used to collect feedback from students about their experiences in a particular course. They typically include questions about the quality of instruction, the relevance of course materials, and the overall learning environment. While the content of evaluations varies from institution to institution, the purpose remains consistent: to provide educators and administrators with data that can be used to enhance teaching and learning outcomes.

## Historical context and evolution

Course evaluations have been used for decades as a means of assessing teaching effectiveness. Initially, they were conducted through in-class surveys using pen and paper. In the 1990s, the rise of technology allowed institutions to begin experimenting with online evaluations, and by the early 2000s, many universities had adopted digital systems. Despite the increased efficiency of online evaluations, response rates remained a challenge. Recent innovations, including mobile-friendly platforms and integrated learning management system (LMS) solutions, have helped increase participation and improve the quality of data collected.



## Types of course evaluations

Different types of course evaluations serve various purposes:



### End-of-term evaluations

These are the most common type, typically conducted at the end of a semester. They focus on evaluating the overall course and the instructor's performance.



### Midterm evaluations

These provide an opportunity for midsemester feedback, allowing instructors to make adjustments before the course ends.



### Specific-focus evaluations

These may target particular areas of a course, such as a specific teaching method or course component, to gain deeper insights into a particular aspect of the learning experience.

# Why course evaluations matter

## QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

1

### Quality improvement

One of the primary functions of course evaluations is to promote quality improvement. By gathering feedback on teaching effectiveness and course content, institutions can identify areas that need development. This helps professors adjust their methods to improve student learning outcomes and provides departments with data to refine their course offerings.

### Enhancing teaching effectiveness

Continuous feedback allows professors to refine their teaching methods, ensuring they are meeting students' needs and addressing any areas of confusion.

### Improvement in course content

Feedback on course structure and content helps departments assess whether the materials are relevant, engaging, and up to date with current academic standards.

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

2

### Student engagement

Course evaluations also play a vital role in fostering student engagement by encouraging students to voice their opinions on their learning experience. This sense of agency promotes accountability among educators and signals to students that their feedback is valued.

### Encouraging student voice

Students are more likely to feel invested in their education when they are given a platform to share their opinions. This promotes a culture of collaboration between students and faculty.

### Fostering accountability

Instructors and administrators are held accountable for the quality of the educational experience when student feedback is regularly reviewed and acted upon.

## INSTITUTIONAL DECISION-MAKING

3

### Institutional decision-making

The data collected from course evaluations is instrumental in making informed decisions about curriculum development, faculty reviews, and programmatic changes.

### Curriculum development

Evaluations provide insights that can shape the direction of new course offerings and refine existing programs.

### Faculty reviews and tenure decisions

Colleges and universities often use evaluation data to assess teaching performance as part of tenure or promotion decisions. This makes it crucial that evaluations be accurate, fair, and comprehensive.



# Benefits of course evaluations

## Enhancing student learning experiences

Course evaluations are designed to improve the quality of education that students receive. By providing feedback on both the strengths and weaknesses of a course, students help faculty identify what is working and what isn't, ensuring a better learning experience for future students.

## Informing faculty development and training

Evaluation data helps higher ed institutions design targeted faculty development programs. For instance, if multiple courses reveal similar issues – such as a lack of clarity in assignment instructions – professional development sessions can be designed to address this gap.

## Strengthening academic program quality

Colleges and universities can use the insights from course evaluations to continuously refine their programs. Over time, this process leads to a more robust and effective academic offering, which in turn enhances the institution's reputation and appeal to prospective students.

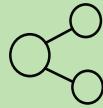
## Building a feedback loop

A strong feedback loop between students and educators is essential for continuous improvement. Course evaluations provide the foundation for this loop by delivering insights that can be used to implement changes in real time.

# Challenges in course evaluations

## Common obstacles

Despite their importance, course evaluations face several challenges, including low response rates, biased feedback, and outdated technology. For example, many schools struggle with getting a significant portion of students to complete evaluations. Without sufficient participation, the data collected may not be representative.



### Low response rates

Achieving high participation rates can be difficult, particularly in an online format. Many students may not feel incentivized to complete evaluations unless they understand the impact of their feedback.

### Biased feedback

Student evaluations can sometimes be influenced by factors unrelated to teaching, such as the student's grade, personal opinions about the instructor's personality, [or unconscious prejudices related to race or gender](#).

### Outdated systems

Colleges and universities that still rely on pen-and-paper methods or basic survey tools often find it challenging to compile and analyze evaluation data efficiently.

## Misconceptions about course evaluations

A significant challenge in improving course evaluations is addressing common misconceptions, such as:



### Evaluations are punitive

Some faculty members may view evaluations as a way to punish underperforming instructors, rather than as a tool for improvement.



### Students don't take evaluations seriously

While there are always outliers, most students do provide thoughtful, constructive feedback.



### Evaluations don't lead to real change

If feedback isn't acted upon, students may feel that their input is ignored, leading to apathy. Ensuring a clear feedback loop and visible changes helps counter this misconception.

## Montreat College's tech-driven revival

Montreat College's experience with an [innovative course evaluations and surveys software solution](#) was "world-changing," said Dr. Paul Gratton, D.B.A., former Associate Dean and Chair of Business at Montreat's College of Adult and Graduate Studies. "I had a great admin named Mary Jo. Mary Jo was part-time, trying to cover a full-time load of work, and was bogged down, having to manually compile and email these end-of-course surveys to people directly." Before, end-of-class evaluation and survey feedback saw a lag time of three to four months — much too late to make meaningful changes before the next courses began. After implementing the new solution, the school began seeing results within about a week, with no manual work required.



## Florida National University's efficiency overhaul

Similarly, Florida National University (FNU) faced significant delays in processing course evaluation data. Dr. Anthony Berrios, Ph.D., former Vice President of Academic Affairs at FNU, highlighted the challenges they faced: "Before, it would take months for survey response data to get filtered and distributed. So by the time that data actually came out, it wasn't even actionable anymore." After [implementing an advanced evaluation system](#), FNU began receiving survey results within three days of a course's end, allowing them to act on the feedback before the next course cycle started.

## Strategies to overcome these challenges

Colleges and universities can address these challenges by leveraging modern technology and framing evaluations as a tool for growth rather than judgment. Modern course evaluation platforms offer real-time analytics and make data easy to access and analyze, helping higher education institutions make timely decisions.

In fact, using tech-forward solutions can transform the course evaluation experience:

### Higher response rates

Leveraging learning management system (LMS) integration and automated reminders can significantly improve student participation.

### Reduced manual work

Automated systems eliminate the need for staff to manually compile and distribute evaluations, freeing up time for more strategic tasks.

### Actionable insights

Modern solutions allow institutions to craft nuanced questions that yield deeper insights into course quality and teaching effectiveness.

## Increasing response rates

### Best practices

Increasing student participation in course evaluations is essential for gathering comprehensive and representative feedback. Colleges and universities can adopt several best practices to boost response rates and ensure evaluations are seen as valuable by students.

### Timing and frequency of evaluations

Timing is crucial in achieving higher response rates. Conducting evaluations during class time often results in higher participation. For online and hybrid courses, sending reminders close to the course's end or directly integrating evaluations within LMS platforms helps capture students while the course is fresh in their minds.

Additionally, conducting mid-term evaluations allows faculty to make real-time adjustments, which increases the likelihood that students will see the results of their feedback and feel encouraged to participate in future evaluations.



## Utilizing technology for convenience

Moving away from paper-based evaluations and adopting user-friendly online platforms can dramatically increase response rates. When evaluations are accessible via mobile devices, students can complete them at their convenience, leading to higher participation. Integrating evaluations into existing LMS systems also helps streamline the process, making it easier for students to access surveys without additional steps.

## Incentives and engagement strategies

While convenience is essential, students may need extra motivation to complete evaluations. Offering incentives or clearly communicating that the impact of their feedback can drive engagement.

## Communicating the importance of feedback

Colleges and universities need to make students aware of how their feedback contributes to real improvements. Transparency is key: when students see that their suggestions are valued and acted upon, they are more likely to participate in future evaluations. Additionally, faculty should emphasize that evaluations are anonymous, making students feel comfortable sharing their honest opinions.

## Offering incentives

Some higher ed institutions have found success in offering small incentives for completing evaluations, such as entry into a raffle, bonus points, or small prizes. These strategies can boost response rates without undermining the integrity of the evaluation process.

## Improving response rates with tech

Innovative tech solutions can drive significantly higher response rates due to [features like LMS integration, automated reminders, and mechanisms like locking grades behind a completion wall](#), motivating students to participate. By making it easy and rewarding for students to provide feedback, schools can achieve high participation rates.



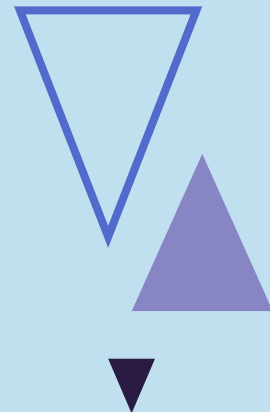
## Creating a supportive environment

### Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality

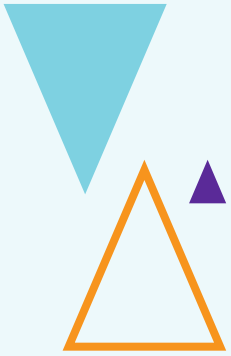
Students are more likely to provide candid feedback if they know that their responses will remain anonymous. Institutions must clearly communicate the confidentiality of evaluations and make sure that no identifying information is collected, particularly when evaluations are conducted online.

### Framing evaluations as a tool for improvement

One of the most effective ways to boost participation is to frame evaluations as a tool for course improvement, rather than as a critique of individual instructors. When students understand that their feedback can lead to a better learning experience, they are more likely to engage thoughtfully with the evaluation process.



# Conducting effective course evaluations



## Designing effective surveys

The design of course evaluations plays a critical role in gathering meaningful feedback. Institutions should focus on crafting clear, concise questions that encourage thoughtful responses.



## Crafting clear and concise questions

Evaluation surveys should avoid overly complicated or ambiguous questions. Instead, focus on asking questions that address specific aspects of the course, such as:

- Was the course content organized logically?**
- Did the instructor present the material clearly?**
- Did the assignments help reinforce key concepts?**

By using straightforward language, colleges and universities can ensure students understand the questions and provide relevant responses.

## Balancing quantitative and qualitative feedback

While quantitative questions (e.g., rating scales) allow institutions to easily compare responses across courses, qualitative feedback (e.g., open-ended questions) provides deeper insights into student experiences. A balanced approach – using both closed-ended and open-ended questions – ensures that evaluations capture both measurable data and nuanced perspectives.



## Utilizing various evaluation methods

In addition to traditional surveys, institutions can use a combination of evaluation methods to gain richer insights into the student experience.

## Peer evaluations

In some cases, incorporating peer evaluations can provide valuable insights into how instructors interact with students and colleagues. This can be particularly useful for evaluating teamwork-based or project-driven courses.

## Focus groups and interviews

For courses that require more in-depth analysis, focus groups and interviews can provide a more detailed understanding of student experiences. These methods allow for follow-up questions and clarifications, allowing you to capture subtler responses.

## Feedback loop

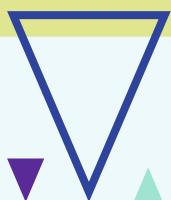
Closing the feedback loop is critical for maintaining student engagement with the evaluation process.

## Sharing results with students and faculty

Institutions should ensure that feedback from course evaluations is shared with both faculty and students. When students see the results and understand how their feedback is being used, they are more likely to participate in future evaluations.

## Implementing changes based on feedback

Acting on evaluation feedback is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the process. Institutions should prioritize implementing meaningful changes based on student responses and communicate those changes to both current and future students.





# Taking course evaluation reporting to the next level



## Advanced reporting techniques

Collecting data is only the first step; colleges and universities must also analyze and present the results in a way that supports decision-making.



## Data visualization and trend analysis

Data visualization tools can help higher ed institutions identify trends over time and compare feedback across departments or courses. By presenting data visually – such as through charts, graphs, and dashboards – administrators and faculty can more easily identify patterns and take action on key insights.



## Sharing best practices across departments

Higher education institutions should foster a culture of collaboration by encouraging departments to share insights and best practices based on evaluation data. This can lead to institution-wide improvements and foster a sense of shared responsibility for enhancing the student experience.



## Utilizing course evaluation data for strategic planning

Course evaluation data can inform broader strategic decisions, from curriculum development to resource allocation. By analyzing feedback at a macro level, schools can identify systemic issues, track progress over time, and align improvements with their long-term goals.



## Roanoke-Chowan Community College sees response rates skyrocket

Roanoke-Chowan Community College experienced a dramatic improvement in response rates after adopting a new software solution. "Our response rates were in the 30 percent range," said Jami Woods, former Vice President of Instruction and Student Services. "Our first semester using Watermark Course Evaluations & Surveys, we were at 83 percent. **The only thing that changed was the technology.**"



## Specific benefits of Watermark Course Evaluations & Surveys

Watermark Course Evaluations & Surveys offers several key benefits, including:



### **Higher response rates**

Achieving participation rates as high as 80 to 90 percent.



### **Real-time analytics**

Instant access to evaluation results, enabling timely action.



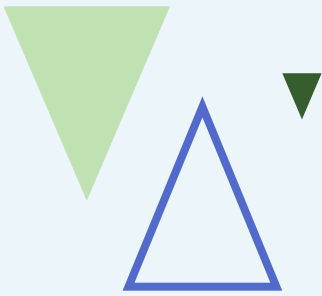
### **Data integration**

Seamless integration with LMS platforms, eliminating manual processes.



### **Customizable surveys**

Institutions can tailor evaluation questions to their specific needs.



# Transform your institution with Watermark Course Evaluations & Surveys

By collecting accurate, timely feedback, institutions can make data-driven decisions that enhance teaching effectiveness, improve the student experience, and strengthen academic programs.

As higher education continues to shift, institutions must adopt cutting-edge solutions to ensure their course evaluation processes are efficient, responsive, and impactful. Implementing best practices, leveraging technology, and maintaining a strong feedback loop will empower institutions to continuously improve and adapt to the needs of both students and faculty.

Encouraging colleges and universities to implement more advanced course evaluation solutions – such as [Watermark Course Evaluations & Surveys](#) – can help them overcome common challenges, boost response rates, and ensure that feedback translates into real change. The stakes are high; institutions that fail to prioritize effective evaluations may face student dissatisfaction and declining enrollment.

Amid the increasing competition that colleges and universities face, improving the course evaluation process is vital to fostering a culture of continuous improvement and staying responsive to the needs of those who matter most – students.





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Watermark gives higher education institutions the tools they need to easily track, manage, and examine their data. For over twenty years, colleges and universities have used Watermark solutions to complete assessment and accreditation requirements, capture and analyze student feedback, showcase faculty accomplishments, and improve student engagement. Watermark's Educational Impact Suite (EIS) puts data into context so faculty and staff can focus on what matters most: institutional and student success.

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