Assessment of Electronic Course Evaluation Technology and its Applicability to the University of Alaska Fairbanks

Stage 2: AY14

Re-examination of top systems from Stage 1, AY13
and
Final Report and Recommendations

Part One: for Faculty Senate, 3/3/14
Part Two: forthcoming

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Joint Report from the Faculty Development, Improvement, and Assessment Committee and the Electronic Course Evaluation Workgroup

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1. Summary of Stage 1

In late summer 2012, Provost Henrichs asked Eric Madsen to facilitate a campus-wide discussion about electronic course evaluation systems. Madsen contacted then-Faculty Senate President Jenifer Reynolds and President-elect David Valentine. The President and President-elect asked the Faculty Development, Assessment, and Improvement Committee (FDAI), chaired by Franz Meyer, to handle the Faculty Senate portion of the discussion and to regularly report to Faculty Senate.

Three members of FDAI agreed to attend all electronic-course evaluation system demonstrations to provide continuity, and Chair Franz Meyer encouraged all FDAI members to attend when possible. Madsen sent frequent invitations to all members of the campus community to attend all demonstrations. A variety of UAF personnel who participated in most or all of the demonstrations, along with the three volunteer FDAI members, constituted the E-Course Evaluation Workgroup, co-chaired by Meyer and Madsen.

During AY13, the workgroup viewed demonstrations of 12 e-course evaluation systems. At the May 2013 Faculty Senate meeting, the workgroup reported through FDAI that it had decided to look more closely at 4 of the 12 e-course evaluation systems during fall semester 2013.[1]

2. Evaluation of Second Round Demonstrations

2.1 Evaluation Procedure

Following the AY13 review of 12 e-course evaluation systems, the workgroup invited 4 vendors to provide somewhat longer and more detailed demonstrations and asked them to build on their first demonstrations to the extent possible. The demonstration schedule was advertised widely across campus and all members of the UAF community were invited. The workgroup particularly thanks Jayne Harvie in the Governance office for her assistance in advertising the demonstrations, and Dolores Baker and Debra Coxon in the Geophysical Institute for making the Globe Room available and assisting with setup.

The four second-round demonstrations included:

- Evaluation Kit: Online Course Evaluation and Survey System (9/20/13)
- eXplorance: Blue / Evaluations (10/11/13)
- Gap Technologies: Smart Evals (11/1/13)
- University of Washington: IAS Online (11/22/13)
- Debrief and Discussion (12/6/13)

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[1] Report to Faculty Senate

2.2 Electronic-Course Evaluation System Features Important for UAF

The workgroup went into the first-round demonstrations with certain ideas about important system considerations. Not surprisingly, some of those were reinforced during the demonstrations while others were discarded or refined. Over eighteen months, the workgroup paid particular attention to considerations such as the following.

a) Amenability to electronic/paper hybrid system: e.g. who would maintain the paper version; who would integrate the data and what would the integration process look like.
b) User-friendliness for all user-groups: students, faculty, staff, administrators
c) Student access modes and access points (computer, tablets, smartphones, QR codes; web-based, LMS integration, special requirements for paper versions...)
d) Provision for student free-responses
e) Degree of openness or restrictions on question sets, including UAF's level of control and process for refining questions over time
f) Provision for instructor, department, school/college, University-generated questions
g) Accommodation of diverse course formats (non-semester based, co-taught, cross-listed, stacked)
h) Accommodation of legacy data
i) Company comments on student response rates
j) Usefulness of reports for different course evaluation purposes (improving instruction, curriculum analysis and planning, faculty evaluation, University data needs...)
k) Technical considerations (hosting, securing, survey deployment/retrieval processes, integration with University data systems, system complexity, training and ongoing support...)
l) Pricing options
m) Unique features and/or concerns

3. Recommendations

3.1 Recommendation 1: The electronic-Course Eval Workgroup recommends eXplorance/Blue Course Evaluations.
The workgroup determined that eXplorance/Blue met all of the electronic course evaluation features important to UAF and addressed more of those considerations or addressed them more adequately than the other systems considered.

Comments on eXplorance/Blue in relation to considerations important to UAF.
a) Amenability to electronic/paper hybrid system.
   • Fully integrated, easy to deploy, and easy to import paper-based data
   • Switchover controlled by UAF; could be as incremental as course-by-course.
   • Build paper forms within system, then generate MSWord doc. Plain paper; not bubble. Run through OCR (optical character recognition), scan back to Blue with any standard scanner. System adds bar codes to tie responses to courses and instructors.

b) User-friendliness for all user-groups: students, faculty, staff, administrators.

- Single-sign on access, e.g. through Blackboard and/or Banner
- "Time-out" feature saves and closes if respondents do not save/close.
- Save and return-to-edit can be turned on or off by UAF
- Manual start-stop for evaluation period would allow for 15 minutes at end of class, as one example.
- Each question can have an optional "comments" section. Responses can be set to go to appropriate recipient, e.g. instructor, department or program.
- Mid-course evals possible. UAF would set option to "on," individual instructors could opt-in / opt-out.

c) Student access modes and access points (computer, tablets, smartphones, QR codes; web-based, LMS integration, special requirements for paper versions...)
   - Supports all mobile devices
   - Full integration into several LMS systems

d) Provision for student free-responses
   - Possible on all questions via optional "comments" block. Can be set to go to instructor only. Fully customizable by UAF.

e) Degree of openness or restrictions on question sets, including UAF's level of control and process for refining questions over time.
   - Blue is fully customizable. UAF can create own question sets, pull from company bank, bring forward legacy questions, or combination.
   - No restrictions on templates
   - On request, company will help develop question sets around particular campus goals
   - UAF could use different question sets for different types of courses or different delivery methods.

f) Provision for instructor, department, school/college, University-generated questions
   - Questions can be generated at any of these levels; responses can be set to go to that level only.
   - Instructors can create own questions or question sets; only they receive responses. E.g. "What did you think of the new instructional technique I tried out?"
   - UAF could add questions for particular student groups, e.g. international students.
   - UAF system administrator could enter questions on behalf of instructors, departments, schools/colleges OR could delegate that authority.

g) Accommodation of diverse course formats (non-semester based, co-taught, cross-listed, stacked)
   - UAF can set "open periods" for non-semester based courses.
   - Can be set ahead via "relative dates," i.e. "ten days before end of course," regardless of when "end" is.
   - Accommodates multiple instructors. Individual comments can go to individual instructors.

h) Accommodation of legacy data
- Company will import legacy data for a fee or will assist UAF.
- Most clients import legacy data themselves. Does not require knowledge about Blue, only about databases in general, e.g. assuring that fieldnames match.
- UAF would decide which data, how far back, etc.

i) Company's comments on response rates
- "Culture of University is most important factor." E.g. utilize system option to prepare certain types of reports for students.
- Internal email system for reminders. Dynamic: addressed to individual students.
- UA could control "from" line to "ramp up" reminders, e.g. instructor, dean, Provost
- When students finish one course evaluation, system loops them back to encourage them to complete others
- System supports optional, UAF-controlled "response rate alarm." [System alerts designated UAF personnel when response rates are low compared to point in time during open response period. UAF then send targeted reminders.]

j) Usefulness of reports for different purposes (improving instruction, curriculum analysis and planning, faculty evaluation, University data needs...)
- UAF controls content, access levels, and report distribution.
- Can aggregate data at course, instructor, department, UAF levels, e.g. specialized and/or campus accreditation processes.
- Can analyze on Banner background data, e.g. responses by gender, class standing, GPA, etc.
- UAF would set threshold for anonymity
- Instructors can request different types of reports tailored for different purposes, e.g. course development, promotion & tenure files
- Can export raw data on any item or report in system; cross-tabulate data on one item vs. another.
- Advanced branching opens comments box if student responds strongly agree or strongly disagree. This also makes survey shorter.
- Can optionally route certain responses to instructor only, e.g. why a student dropped out
- Each question has an "importance scale" on which students can rate importance of that question to them personally.

k) Technical considerations (hosting, securing, survey deployment/retrieval processes, integration with University data systems, system complexity, training and ongoing support...)
- Single-sign on access
- Can export data to .xls, SPSS, etc
- If eXplorance hosts, company provides dedicated server for UAF; not mixed with other universities.

- System can interact with multiple UAF databases.
- Blue can manually pull from Banner and other databases, or UAF can set Banner to push to Blue.
- Week of training in first-year package. Typically "train the trainers."
- Multiple technical services and training options.
- Standard support hours (Eastern time zone) with optional emergency path and evenings/weekends on request
- Only BlackBoard Premier partner (as of 2/14). [Chris Beks, OIT, advises that this means "deep integration" between the systems.]

l) Pricing options
- Company will sell software (perpetual model) or lease (fee per lease period).
- Under either option, Blue can run on eXplorance server or UAF server

m) Unique features/concerns
- No major concerns
- New feature 2/14; no cost: Blue "Pulse"
    - Allows instructors to poll students during semester. Open-forum model within course; responses seen only by instructor and students. Student replies are anonymous. May negate need for mid-term evaluations because continuous.

n) Further information
Over 200 educational institutions have adopted eXplorance/Blue Course Evaluations over the past ten years. Please see Appendix A for further information.

A 47 minute video overview of eXplorance/Blue Course Evaluations is available at http://demo.explore-blue.com/CE_Demo.wmv. Mac users: If your browser wants to download the file, you may prefer to try a different browser or simply copy and paste the link into Flip Player or Quick Time Player:

3.2 Recommendation 2: UAF should move to an electronic course evaluation system.

Paper-based course evaluation systems are costly to deploy, retrieve, and store; they demand large amounts of personnel time; data-analysis is inefficient; refining questions to make them more meaningful is difficult; and security is problematic. In viewing the system demonstrations and questioning the presenters, the workgroup was mindful that electronic course evaluation systems present their own versions of some of these same challenges and introduce others. Throughout the process, we considered as separate questions: Is there an electronic course evaluation system that adequately addresses concerns and offers enough advantages to make a transition worthwhile? Should UAF move to an electronic course evaluation system at all?

The demonstrations and discussions summarized in 3.1, above, led the workgroup to conclude that eXplorance/Blue does adequately address the concerns we had and that colleagues suggested, and does offer enough advantages to make a transition worthwhile.

Particularly, eXplorance/Blue efficiently includes a paper option. The workgroup considers the paper option important for students who do not have, or do not yet have, ready access to devices necessary to respond electronically; for field-based or other courses where an electronic system would be problematic; and to facilitate a smooth transition.

In view of that conclusion, the workgroup recommends that UAF should move to an electronic course evaluation system. Our report now turns attention to transition considerations and steps.

Appendix A: Institutions that have adopted eXplorance/Blue Course Evaluations.

1. [eXplorance website: News and Events](). Lists educational institutions by year they adopted eXplorance: Blue Course Evaluations.
2. Other educational institutions that have allowed eXplorance to display their logos on the Blue Course Evaluations website or to use their names:
   a. University of Louisville
   b. Université Laval
   c. Boston College
   d. University of Toronto
   e. University of Pennsylvania
   f. University of Alabama
3. A simple internet search for "eXplorance Blue" reveals many universities that have reviewed and/or adopted Blue Course Evaluations. UAF Faculty Senators may have colleagues at some of these institutions.