Proposal to Adopt an Electronic-based Course Evaluation System

Introduction and Background
The following proposes SMC’s adoption of an electronic-based course evaluation system. In general terms, our current paper-based system is unsustainable and we propose, for the sake of efficiency, effectiveness, and better course evaluation data analysis tools, the move to an electronic-based system. Below are details on what led to the investigation of an electronic system, the goals, tasks and a timeline for implementing such a system, and a communication plan to facilitate the transition.

In 2005, SMC began its use of Scantron’s Class Climate course evaluation system. This system has become unsustainable for a variety of reasons:

- Annually, Scantron sends a software upgrade which must be applied by Instructional Technology Services (ITS). Over the last several years, ITS has not had the capacity to apply these upgrades in a timely manner.
- Both Scantron’s hardware (i.e., the paper scanner) and software have repeatedly failed, causing delays. During Academic Year 2010-11, a collapse in the hardware caused a campus-wide 8-month delay in the course evaluation process. Ultimately, SMC staff resolved the problem by tracking down a Scantron representative in Germany.
- It takes approximately one month every semester to prepare for the distribution of course evaluations. Packets must be created for each class, translating to roughly 15,000 paper evaluations distributed every semester. Approximately 50,000 evaluations are distributed each academic year—manually.
- Representatives from the Provost’s Office are sent to classrooms to administer the evaluation where the faculty member is engaged in the promotion and tenure process, a necessary but labor-intensive task.
- Student monitors are used for all other courses. These monitors are responsible for administering and transporting the evaluations to the Provost’s Office. Every semester, a portion of evaluations are either lost or arrive late, after the evaluation cycle has ended.
- The paper scanner does not work effectively, requiring staff to “clean the data.” For example, comments made with ink that is not blue or black are not recorded, leaving staff having to re-mark the evaluation; regularly, comments on the evaluation have to interpreted and rewritten; and some evaluations are “unusable” as a result being torn or otherwise not able to enter the scanner.
- Over the course of a year, up to 3 student workers are assigned to the course evaluation process for several months, 2 full-time staff spend at least 25% of their time on the process, running simple tasks such as orienting each paper evaluation the same way before entering it into the scanner, and at least 1 administrator is regularly engaged in the keeping the system from collapsing.

In response to these problems, the Office of Institutional Research in collaboration with the Provost’s Office and ITS investigated nearly a dozen electronic-based course evaluations system during Summer 2012. See Appendix A for the vendors considered and the evaluative criteria.
used. After narrowing the field, the group presented its recommendation to Provost Dobkin in early August 2012. At that meeting, with the Provost’s consent, we selected eXplorance Blue as SMC’s best solution.

Details about eXplorance Blue can be found in Appendix B. This system met all of our product requirements and, by virtue of its complexity and depth, offers the most promise in providing an effective and reliable course evaluation system.\(^1\) We were particularly impressed with Blue’s ability to present data longitudinally and for the multiple ways faculty could disaggregate their data. This system was demonstrated to Senate leadership and the academic deans in August 2012. At the end of this demonstration, the Senate Chair requested it be demonstrated again to the entire Senate and that a formal proposal to adopt the system be submitted.

Goals, Tasks, and Timeline

The adoption of an electronic-based course evaluation system is informed by three primary goals, which can be organized into phases:

- **Phase 1:** To investigate and select an electronic-based course evaluation system.
- **Phase 2:** To use an incremental approach in introducing this system to all SMC academic programs.
- **Phase 3:** To track student response rates for the new system while taking preventative measures to avoid a precipitous fall in response.

These goals inform the following tasks:

**Phase 1: Investigation**

1) Share investigation and implementation plan and secure funding.
2) Complete requirements document.
3) Narrow list of possible systems using requirements document.
4) Select a single system for adoption.
5) Adapt system for use at SMC.

**Phase 2: System Introduction**

1) Pilot system.
2) Improve the system based on evaluative feedback.
3) Introduce the system to approximately half of the academic programs.
4) Improve the system based on evaluative feedback.
5) Introduce the system to approximately half of the remaining academic programs.
6) Improve the system based on evaluative feedback.

**Phase 3: Student response**

1) During each introduction of the system, track student response rates.
2) Monitor communication about the system.

\(^1\) eXplorance Blue has the added benefit of being used by multiple Catholic colleges and universities, such as Los Angeles’ LMU or Loyola Maryland University. SMC would join our “sister institutions” in using this system.
3) If necessary, suggest policy on improving response to Senate.

The following faculty and administrators will be involved in these tasks:
• Provost Dobkin: offer input; ensure use of the system; support overall effort.
• Academic Senate: offer input; ensure use of the system, support overall effort.
• Chris Procello (IR): project manager; organize tasks during phases; communicate progress.
• Sheila Pallotta (ITS): collaborate with Chris; provide technical expertise.
• Peter Greco (ITS): stay abreast of developments; support overall effort.

These goals and tasks inform the following timeline:

Phase 1: Investigation
Summer 2012:
• Complete planning and requirements document.
• Develop list of possible systems for SMC.
• Narrow list and select a single system for piloting.

Phase 2: System introduction
Fall 2012:
• Share plans with and demonstrate the system to deans and Senate faculty.
• Adapt system for use at SMC.
• Prepare for piloting.
• Pilot. Test semesterly cycle of communication.
• Collect and review evaluative feedback.

Spring 2013:
• Introduce the system to approximately half of the academic programs.
• Collect and review evaluative feedback.

Fall 2013:
• Introduce the system to approximately half of the remaining academic programs.
• Collect and review evaluative feedback.

Phase 3: Track student response
Spring 2014:
• Report on student response over past year.
• If necessary, suggest policy on improving response (e.g., “grade blocking”) to Senate.

Note: The pilot will reduce risks to the overall process and untenured faculty. First, the existing capacity for paper administration will remain. If, for any reason, the electronic system fails we can revert to paper. Second, the pilot will involve neither non-tenured faculty nor associate professors—it will only involve full professors. This group is best protected if evaluation data is lost or unanticipated problems emerge. We intend to ask full professors to volunteer to be a part of the pilot.
Communication Plan
It is typical for response rates to initially drop as a result of moving from paper to electronic administration of course evaluations for the obvious reason that students are a “captured audience” during a paper-based administration.\(^2\) In preventing such a drop, SMC has several advantages: 1) we’re late in adopting an electronic-based system and can take the lessons learned from a multitude of other campuses, 2) generally, the principles to increase response rate are the same for increasing survey response rates, a second rich resource to draw from, and 3) eXplorance has experience in addressing this issue as it has served approximately 120 higher education institutions and is obligated to offer support as a part of our contract.

The exact steps SMC will take to prevent a drop in response rates will be developed during piloting, in the context of actually using the system. These details will be completed prior to full implementation and tested/revised for the first several years. For now, we anticipate taking action in three areas:
- **Developing leadership support:** The system must be supported and publicly promoted by academic administrators and Senate leadership. They must encourage faculty to learn and use the system; they must support any faculty training. Relatedly, SMC leadership must expect all faculty to promote use of the system to their students and think creatively about increasing use in relation to response rates, if necessary.
- **Developing a semesterly cycle of communication:** Each semester, there will be a regular cycle of communication to ensure use of the system. There are three aspects to this cycle: notification, timely access, and reminders. Following is an example is a semesterly cycle of communication:
  The course evaluation cycle begins with notification; it begins with a message sent three weeks before the last day of classes containing the starting date. Notification is sent to all academic administrators, faculty, and students. Access to the system begins a week before last day of classes with 1) a link to students’ course evaluations sent and 2) notification to faculty that these links have been sent. The messages containing these links emphasize the deadline. Finally, a reminder message is sent during the last week of classes. This reminder is sent to all students and faculty, reemphasizing the deadline.
- **Incentives and “grade blocking”:** Many campuses have mixed incentives and punitive measures. Common incentives include offering extra credit and prizes for completing the evaluation. At the other end of this spectrum are more punitive measures such as “grade blocking,” or withholding grades. In the case of grade blocking, students who missed the deadline are sent a note that their grades will be withheld until (a) they complete the evaluation or (b) 3 weeks from the last day of classes.

\(^2\) Recent developments allow for mimicking paper administration with electronic means. eXplorance Blue would allow students to complete their evaluation using their smartphone, ipad, or the like. Considering that a majority of these students own one of these devises, faculty could ask them to complete the evaluation in class.