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Grade Incentive to Boost Course Evaluation Response Rates

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Abstract:
Abstract In most schools of nursing, students rate their satisfaction with courses and teachers at the end of the semester. Low response rates on these evaluations make it difficult to interpret the results. Students were incentivized to complete their course evaluations by adding 1–2 points to one test score in the course in exchange for 85% or higher participation by the total cohort. Ongoing monitoring and communication to students by faculty during the process was critical to motivating students to complete course evaluations. When the incentive was employed, student participation ranged from a low of 90% to a high of 100% response rate. The added points did not change any of the students’ grades. Incentivizing students to complete course evaluations is an effective strategy to boost response rates without changing final course grades.

Keywords: grade incentive, online course evaluation, student evaluation of teaching, response rates

DOI: 10.1515/ijnes-2018-0031

Received: May 31, 2018; Accepted: June 8, 2018

Most schools of nursing use student ratings of courses and teachers at the end of the semester as one of the main sources of data on teaching effectiveness. For these evaluations, students typically rate the teacher’s ability to explain concepts and engage students in learning, teacher’s interactions with students, assignments in the course and if they promoted learning, quality of the feedback to students, grading procedures, and teacher’s enthusiasm, among other areas. Student evaluations of teaching (SET) are not the only source of data on the teacher’s effectiveness. Other data on teaching may come from peers including both a review of course materials and observation in the classroom or laboratory, administrators, and teachers themselves such as with a teaching portfolio and self-assessment. Even though there are multiple sources of data on teaching, student ratings carry significant weight in many schools of nursing. These ratings are used for making personnel decisions such as contract renewal, promotion, and tenure. They also provide feedback to the nurse educator about improvements that might be needed in the course and teaching practices (Bush et al., 2018; Oermann et al., 2018).

The shift over the years in most schools of nursing and universities to online forms for SET has resulted in lower response rates (Chapman & Joines, 2017). Low response rates make it difficult to interpret the results, which affect the use of SET data for personnel decisions and feedback to the faculty member. Low response rates are particularly problematic in clinical courses with small groups of students.

The percentage of students completing their end-of-course evaluations in a prelicensure course, taught by two of the authors, had been low for many years. Students reported that the main reason for not completing these evaluations was the large number that had to be done at the end of the semester. In each clinical course in the nursing program, students have four evaluations to complete: of the course, faculty member, clinical instructor, and clinical site. When more than one faculty member teaches in the course, there is an added SET form. In the context of students’ typical course load for a semester, the number of course evaluations can amount to approximately 12 different evaluations. This is a significant time burden for students considering the multiple other commitments associated with the end of the semester, for example, preparing for final examinations. In an attempt to increase the number of students completing their SET forms, the authors implemented an incentive strategy in the course. The purpose of this article is to describe the incentives used and resulting response rates for end-of-course evaluations.

Background

Student evaluations of teaching are used widely in schools of nursing and higher education. Important decisions are made based on SET scores, and student ratings need to be interpreted accurately. Of particular importance in interpreting SET scores is having an awareness of characteristics of courses that might influence
ratings such as higher ratings for upper level versus introductory courses, for elective versus required courses, and for smaller versus larger classes (Annan et al., 2013; Benton & Cashin, 2009; Benton & Ryalls, 2016; Oermann, 2017). Other reasons why SET data may be misinterpreted are using forms that have not been validated, scores not analyzed appropriately, over interpreting small differences in scores, and low response rates (Adams & Umbach, 2012; Algozzine et al., 2010; Boysen, 2015; Chapman & Joines, 2017). With low response rates for SET, the results may be biased and lack significance. Faculty may be concerned that only students who were dissatisfied with the course and teaching completed their evaluations (Chapman & Joines, 2017). With low response rates, it is not known whether the students who responded are representative of the class or clinical group as a whole. Not only is this a problem in interpreting the results for making personnel decisions, low response rates limit the value of student ratings for course and teaching improvement.

While students provide a unique perspective on teaching and can indicate their satisfaction with a course and how it was carried out, student ratings are not related to learning in a course (Uttl, White & Gonzalez, 2017). While some faculty and administrators believe that students learn more from faculty who have high SET scores, a meta-analysis of studies of multi-section courses by Uttl et al. found no significant correlations between SET ratings and learning outcomes.

The shift to online SET forms has resulted in lower response rates for these evaluations compared to completing them in paper and pencil format (Adams & Umbach, 2012; Chapman & Joines, 2017; Goodman, Anson & Belcheir, 2015). In a study by Gerbase et al. (2015), which compared paper and pencil and online formats, response rates were 74% for paper and pencil and only 30% for online. Low response rates for course evaluations are an issue particularly in courses with small enrollments. Nulty (2008) calculated the range of response rates for courses with student enrollment of different sizes and recommended that a minimum acceptable rate for a course with 20 students was 58%; for a course with 80 students, it was a 25% response rate. Nulty recommended that schools adopt strategies to increase response rates such as through incentives.

Various strategies have been used to encourage students to complete their online SET forms. One strategy to increase response rates is through reminders. Chapman and Joines (2017) found that incentives such as telling students the importance of SET, creating a positive learning climate in the class for students to be committed to completing their forms, and explaining how faculty use the feedback from students were effective in increasing response rates for online course evaluations. Other effective strategies include completing the SET form in class (Goodman, Anson & Belcheir, 2015) and offering incentives to students when a certain percentage of the class submitted their course evaluations. Laguilles, Williams, and Saunders (2010) assessed the effectiveness of lottery incentives to complete the SET including a raffle of an iPod Nano (Apple®), iPod touch (Apple®), and ten $50 gift cards for on-campus dining. All three incentives boosted response rates.

Goodman, Anson, and Belcheir (2015) studied online SET response rates and the impact of incentives with a sample of 678 faculty. While only 22.3% of the faculty provided incentives for completing the course evaluations, those who did had the highest response rates in their courses (79%). Using multiple regression, Goodman et al. found that the most important variable in predicting SET response rates was whether the faculty member offered students an incentive. In this study, the most common incentives used were adding points to a test score or a percent to the total course grade when a certain percentage of students completed their SET forms. For example, when 80% of the class completed the SET, then three points were added to every student’s final grade. The second most effective strategy for boosting response rates was taking class time for students to complete their evaluations (used by 4.8% of the faculty with 70% response rate). Other strategies that improved response rates, but not to the same degree, were reminding students to complete the SET, explaining how the evaluations are used, sending personal emails to students, and posting reminders in the learning management system.

Few studies have examined incentives in nursing education. Ford (2014) used a grade incentive to increase nursing students’ response rates on online SET. Points were added to the total course grade for all students based on the percentage of the class that completed their evaluations. The class received no points if the response rate was less than 75%. One point was added if the response rate was 75% to 84%, two points for 85% to 99%, and three points if 100% of the students completed their course evaluations. This incentive resulted in significantly higher response rates but did not change the mean grade point average of students.

**Incentive strategy**

In 2010 and 2011, the response rates on SET, which are done online in our School of Nursing, ranged from 17.74% to 74.00% for our course. To boost these rates, an incentive was implemented: up to two points would be added to one course examination score based on the percentage of the class that completed their end-of-course evaluations. The conditions for these additional points were: (a) if 85% of the total class completed the
SET form, one point would be added to the score of the third course examination for all students, and (b) if 86% or more of the class completed evaluations, two points would be added to the score. This examination was chosen because it is typically the most challenging for students of the three examinations in the course due to its inclusion of more application and critical thinking items. The incentive strategy was presented in class and then followed with a written communication that highlighted the key points of the strategy.

The monitoring of response rates was done in tandem between the course faculty and staff member who administers the course evaluations. Course faculty had access to the percentage of the class as a whole that completed the SET forms but not to individual student responses. Course faculty then communicated this percentage at weekly intervals to the students up to the end of the course. The study was approved by the authors’ University Institutional Review Board.

Results

We examined the effects of using this incentive on SET response rates and course grades for 13 semesters. In nine of these semesters, response rates were more than 90%, and in three of these, 100% of the class completed their course evaluation forms (Figure 1). In fall 2012, spring 2017, and spring 2018, we did not offer these grade incentives, to reassess the need for them, and the mean SET response rate for these semesters was only 41.67%. These students received an email indicating when the evaluations would be available (three weeks before the end of the course) and were sent three reminders about completing them, as part of the School’s process for SET. There also is a statement in the course syllabus that reinforces the message to students that completing course evaluations is part of their professional role and that the information obtained from them assists faculty in making changes in the course for future cohorts. These other strategies, however, were not effective in encouraging students to complete their evaluations.

![Figure 1: Course evaluation response rates with addition of grade incentives. Arrows represent 3 semesters when incentives not used.](image)

Using an incentive of adding one point to an examination when 85% of the total class completed their evaluations and two points for a higher percentage was effective in raising the SET response rates, allowing for rich reflection of the course and thoughtful changes over time based on student feedback. To determine if the incentive would change the course grades for students, calculations were completed on students’ grades over the 13 semesters. These added points did not change any of the students’ grades.

Discussion

Results from 13 semesters of student course evaluation data spanning six years is consistent with findings that student response rates are increased when grade incentives are offered (Ford, 2014). While the use of technology improves the efficiency of collecting and analyzing evaluation data, it has a negative impact on student response rate (Chapman & Joines, 2017); creative low-stakes approaches can be used to help boost participation.

While we offered minimal points that ultimately had no effect on the overall final course grade, students perceived this to be enough of an incentive to participate. Students draw their own interpretations about the impact of a modest addition of points to an examination score on their final course grade. Because course grades are integral to success in graduate studies in nursing (Patzer et al., 2017), students may use every possible advantage to ensure the highest grades possible.

Another motivator for completion of this incentive was the structure in that a high percentage of the class needed to complete the evaluation for everyone to receive the additional points. This meant that even for stu-
dents with high grades, the majority needed to participate so the whole class could benefit. Many contemporary nursing students are millennials. Research has found that this group is particularly influenced in the classroom by unspoken peer pressure (Toothaker & Taliaferro, 2017) because they place a significant value on relationships and peer input.

This incentive approach is sustainable over time. When grade incentives were intentionally withdrawn, response rates decreased. When this occurred the first time, faculty considered if this was a random occurrence. After eight more semesters of incentive use, faculty withdrew the incentive again to determine if the strategy was still necessary. Since response rates were lower after withdrawing the incentive, the authors concluded that the strategy was still effective. While offering financially based incentives such as gift cards and iPod raffles have been found to be effective (Laguilles, Williams & Saunders, 2010), ongoing sustainability may be cost prohibitive for most schools of nursing. Use of a modest point award is one way for faculty to boost SET response rates.

Given the amount of time and effort faculty spend designing engaging nursing courses, teachers would prefer that students complete their evaluations as part of their professional responsibility; however, this is not always the case. Because lower response rates are associated with using electronic SET evaluations (Goodman, Anson & Belcheir, 2015), incentives can be a positive low stakes approach to boost these rates. Higher response rates and more feedback from students will provide sufficient trend data to make changes in courses, and also are useful for annual faculty evaluation and promotion.

Summary

Results indicated that the addition of 1–2 points to one examination was an effective incentive to increase student participation in course evaluations and did not change the final course grade of any student. The effectiveness of this strategy was tested by removing the incentive for selected semesters, and a significant decrease in student participation occurred in each of those semesters. Because of the effectiveness of this strategy with no change in final course grades, this type of incentive is a mechanism for faculty to elicit feedback from a large percentage of each cohort. This allows faculty to determine that changes made to a course are in alignment with the input of previous cohorts of students.

References


