

*This study was commissioned by Teaching and Learning Services in fall 2012. The goal was to understand factors influencing students' likelihood of completing end-of-course evaluations with a view to making suggestions that could be implemented at McGill.*

## **The Students Respond: Increasing End-of-Course Evaluation Response Rates**

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13 June 2013

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study took place over six months, analyzing the limited literature on factors contributing to course evaluation response rates, collecting data from McGill undergraduate students, and analyzing the results. This report reviews the data and findings and ends with three recommendations that can be implemented to increase response rates. Overall, we found that students do not complete course evaluations because the timing is bad and they feel that their feedback is not valued.

### **DATA AND METHODS**

Data were collected from three sources:

1. Focus Groups – two focus groups were held. Two students participated in the first focus group and five in the second.
2. Interviews – Eight students were interviewed.
3. Questionnaire – The findings from the focus group and interview were transformed into questions for an online questionnaire; 58 McGill students responded.

<b>Sex</b>	
Female	41
Male	32
<b>Faculty</b>	
Arts	32
Desautels Faculty of Management	9
Education	1
Engineering	6
Law	1
McGill School of Environment	2
Medicine	2
Religious Studies	4
School of Continuing Studies	1
Science	12
Other	3

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

## FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Three main themes consistently showed up in the qualitative data:

1. Course evaluation timing,
2. Desire to feel connected to feedback, and
3. Logistical issues.

### 1. Course evaluation timing

#### (1.1) *A stressful time*

There was general agreement across both focus groups and nearly all interviews that course evaluations are currently requested during an inconvenient time period. A fourth year student in Engineering stated, *“The evaluations go out now [before exams], when everyone is stressed. They should go out later, after exams. These emails for evaluations flood our inboxes when everything else is flooding our inboxes.”*

#### (1.2) *The right to evaluate an exam*

Similarly, focus group participants felt they had the right to evaluate the exam in the course evaluations. A fourth year student in Management commented, *“Send it out after classes end. During my 1<sup>st</sup> year, I filled mine out before I was finished with finals, and then in one of my classes the finals all came back with much lower than average scores. There was something wrong, but he refused to curve the scores and I couldn’t revise my evaluation. Now I always wait to fill out evaluations on the last possible day.”* Adding to her thought, another student responded: *“Especially when the final is worth 60% or more of your grade, you don’t want to fill out the evaluations before that final is over.”*

#### (1.3) *Extended dates will not impact feedback*

In the focus group discussions students raised the question: *“Why is it [course evaluations] so early? Some departments seem to have different closing dates.”* The focus group moderator explained that some instructors in certain faculties are resistant to extending deadlines because they worry bad final marks will negatively and unfairly affect what students say about that course. Upon hearing this, a second year pharmacology student remarked: *“I don’t think a bad mark would change how you feel about a course overall.”* A first year arts student also commented, he states, *“And maybe the final really is too hard and needs to be changed.”*

### 2. A desire to feel connected

Nearly all students expressed a desire to feel connected to their feedback; in other words, to see evidence that their feedback is valued.

### (2.1) *Importance of feedback not communicated*

A fourth year management student commented, “*The worst professors get lots of feedback but never change or get better. Everything stays the same.*” A third year cognitive science student stated, “*It’s hard to follow-up on whether a course has changed or not.*” A third year Economics’ student added, “*Yeah, it’s hard to know unless you go sit in on a lecture or something.*”

Increasing response rates can be as simple as an instructor showing genuine interest in student opinions. A fourth year environment student (T.) and a third year cognitive science student (J.) both echoed this sentiment:

*T: “Knowing that they have an honest interest in wanting feedback makes it worthwhile.*

*J: Yeah, just a sign that it matters. I feel more for TAs because you know them better and you know that there will be more concrete results or effects for them, like getting hired.*

### (2.2) *Alternative methods of feedback*

Students do not feel that their feedback is valued; we asked them for suggestions as to how to communicate this to fellow students. The following is an exchange between a fourth year Environment student (T.), a third year Pharmacology Student (K.), and a third year Cognitive Science student (J.):

*T: There should be alternative ways, including in class, to give feedback to professors. That’s not anonymous, and it maybe wouldn’t replace course evaluations, but it would be really helpful.*

*K: Big classes would be difficult. There must be low response rates in these, because one person just feels so meaningless in those.*

*T: Maybe break up a large class, and small groups could talk to a TA or a TLS person like you mid-way through to talk about the class.*

*J: Everything comes out in tutorials because they’re smaller. TAs must get a lot of feedback, but maybe they wouldn’t want to share it with the professors because they are their bosses.*

A first year Arts student in the same group summed up their sentiment: “*Make it a dialog throughout the semester, or have the mid-term evaluation.*”

## **3. Devote in-class time**

To a lesser extent, although equally as important, focus group and interview students expressed the importance of in-class time devoted to end-of-course evaluations. Often students would suggest reverting to in-class paper evaluations commenting, *the response rate would be nearly 100%*. Although reverting to paper based evaluations is out of the question, the essence behind this suggestion is to get students to do course evaluations on the instructor’s time. This spirit can be respected with online course evaluations as well.

## QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The findings from focus group and interviews were confirmed with the online questionnaire.

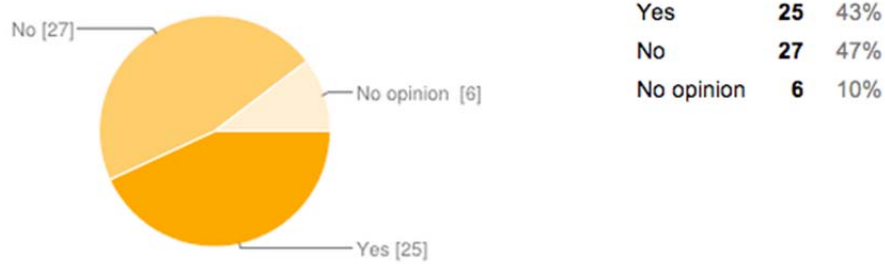
### I would be more likely to complete course evaluations if....

...I could fill them out after my exams were done.



61% of students from our sample said they would be more likely to complete course evaluations after exams were done. This confirms the potential positive impact of extended course evaluation periods on response rates.

### In general, do you believe professors take feedback from course evaluations seriously?



47% of survey respondents believe that instructors do not take feedback from course evaluations seriously. This suggests that if students felt that their feedback was taken seriously they would be more likely to respond.

## I would be more likely to complete course evaluations if....

...changes were also made to the course while I was still taking it.



74% of our survey respondents said, yes, they would be more likely to complete course evaluations if changes were also made to the course while they were still in the course. This reinforces the need to see their feedback in action, to feel connected to the professor and the course.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study there are several changes that could be implemented immediately and concurrently to increase the response rate for end-of-course evaluations:

- 1) *Extended Dates*: Have course evaluations accessible *after* the end of classes until the end of the exam period.
  - a) If there is resistance such that the extended dates option is not implemented, we suggest a small logistical change:

*In-Class Time*: Encourage instructors to give their students in-class time to complete online-course evaluations. For example: Prof. Bob can ask his students to bring their laptop to class. At the start of class, the instructor will invite his students to take 20 minutes immediately to complete the course evaluation for his course. The instructor will leave the room while the students complete the evaluation.

- 2) *Evidence of Impact*: We must communicate to students that instructors do care about feedback and take course evaluations seriously. There are two ways to achieve this:
  - a) *Mid-course evaluations*: Have a system in place whereby students can provide feedback in the middle of or throughout the semester. There are a number of ways to do this: anonymous discussion boards, a formal online survey, teaching assistants collecting feedback in seminars, or having an in-class forum with the instructor. A more formal and exhaustive list is available on the Teaching and Learning Services website ([www.mcgill.ca/tls/teaching/course-evaluations](http://www.mcgill.ca/tls/teaching/course-evaluations)).
  - b) *Highlight instructors who take course evaluation feedback seriously through video profiles*. This would help communicate to students that their feedback matters.