

Encouraging Students to Fill Out Course Evaluations: Advice from New School Faculty

In November 2013, faculty who received response rates of 80% and above for spring 2013 classes were asked how they encouraged students to fill out the evaluation forms. Over 100 faculty members responded; here is a summary of responses to the question, “How did you do it?”

Have students fill out forms in class; students can fill out surveys on laptops, tablets, iPhones and Androids

- “My teaching partner and I designated a particular day to have the students do the evaluations. They were given prior notice and asked to bring their laptops or Ipads to class. They were given roughly 20 minutes to fill out the survey at which time we left the room.... This in essence winds up being an 'electronic' version of the old system when we would hand out the forms and leave the room.”
- “When I think about the actual student experience at the end of the term, add up all the evaluations (7-8 evaluations at 20 minutes each, that's a little over two hours) plus gathering together their projects and materials, having projects photographed, packing for their holiday with their families - that's a lot of time and I think it makes sense for faculty to include the evaluations during the class time learning envelope.”
- “I think students feel encouraged when they can work as a group under a set time frame. I think they like the ritual aspect of it.”

Let students know their feedback is important to YOU and tell them of past changes due to feedback

- “I talked the students in both the classes I taught last year and made it a personal request for them to give me feedback on how I taught. It was my 1st semester teaching at Parsons and I truly wanted their honest and constructive feedback.”
- “I give them specific examples of comments students have written in the past, and how I use specific comments to develop or improve course content. I tell them how important their feedback is to me (because I mean it).”
- “I asked them to fill out the forms outside of class and explained that they would get their grade earlier if they did so. What I think may have had more impact, though, was that I genuinely really wanted them to fill out the forms and explained that constructive criticism would help me, as a teacher, to know what was successful and what I could improve for the next semester.”

Let students know that others at The New School read and consider their feedback

- “I did remind them a few times that courses and program planning depends on feedback and this is their way to have a say in whether they wish to particular course to be offered again and in what form.”
- “Every semester I simply reassure my students that the course evaluations are indeed read by the department.”

Build a culture of feedback in the classroom, perhaps through collecting feedback mid-semester

- “Honestly, I did verbally remind and encourage on a number of occasions in class, but more importantly I work really hard to make sure that my students feel that they have a real stake in how classes are taught, both my class individually and classes in general. In my opinion, the more students feel that they are empowered as stakeholders in the educational process, that we are really listening to their feedback, the more they want to offer it. So I don’t think it’s just about methods of filling out forms, but about building a culture in which they know the feedback on the forms really matters.”
- “I attribute the rate to two things: 1) I dedicated 15 minutes of class time to evaluations near the end of the semester (leaving the room while they filled things out) and 2) throughout the semester I emphasized how seriously I took their feedback and how it would affect how I would teach the course in the future. In all my courses I typically do an informal, offline mid-semester eval to check in, too – so they know that the final one is not the only one that counts.”
- “While I didn’t do anything specific to get the students to fill out the form (other than remind them in class), I tend to run a very interactive and responsive classroom. This includes critical reflection assignments in which students assess their own learning and a quiz question in which I ask them for feedback on the course about midway through the semester--and I respond to that input by adapting class topics based on student input, as long as remains within the scope of the course. I imagine (and hope) that this dynamic makes students feel more engaged in the class and lets them know that their comments actually being taken seriously by the professor.”

Add self-designed questions to the survey and let students know about them

- “I also told them that I had included personal questions of my own and this too may have made them more responsive--knowing how important it was to me alone to have information.”

Reassure students that 1) responses are anonymous and 2) you will not see the results until after final grades have been submitted.

- “I told them it was an opportunity to have their voice heard in all their classes, input on good teachers as well as not so good. And I said that, as it was anonymous, I was interested in any suggestions or critiques they had about the course that they might otherwise be reluctant to share. I told them I really do read them after grades are in.”
- “Each time that I encouraged them, I assured them that their course evals would never be traced to their name.”

Remind students that they have early access to grade viewing by filling out the evaluation forms

- “I remind them frequently, as the semester end approaches, that the evaluations are not only important to the university, but also to me...in order to better serve the needs of students in future semesters. Near the end, I emphasize that they can get their grades sooner by filling out the form.”
- “The other tactic is getting in the grades immediately so those that finish the response get those grades. That’s very motivating even as students like to pretend that they 'don't care about grades.’”

List “Complete course evaluations” on your syllabus as an assignment for the final week of class.

- “I didn’t do this, but I wonder if it would be helpful to encourage instructors to write "Course Evaluation" into a particular date on the syllabus, so all semester the students are looking at a document that indicates that evaluation is integral to the course itself.”

- “Finally, we included filling out the survey on the syllabus in the last week as well.”

Frequent Reminders; the online ratings provider, EvaluationKit, has a feature that shows the instructor the specific class response rate day-to-day during the submission period, and several faculty said they found that useful.

- “My answer is repetition! I always remind my students to fill the evaluations out. I tell them it is considered homework. I also stress each year how important assessment is to me as a teacher, and how they need to be honest, as this will make me a better educator or will make the course better for future students.”
- “I gently hounded them! Made it a bit of a game, keeping track of the percentage until it was 100%”
- “I nagged (nicely!)--early and often!”
- “I asked them to, I reminded them to, I reminded them to again, and I thanked them for doing this! I also reminded them that it helps build a better class all around!”
- “The process begins when I announce the availability of the online ratings system to my students, explain its purpose, and encourage them to respond. It continues as I check the input periodically and inform my students where we are in the percentages. I do this via email, encouraging everyone to respond. These status and supportive emails reach the students twice during the response period. I complete the gestalt by telling everyone our final rating. In essence, it's a matter of building an engaged community of responders, keeping them informed, and congratulating them on doing well. Time - effort - communication. The building blocks!”

Use Multiple Tactics

- “When I sent out several reminders for the notifications, the phrasing I used implied that it was required. I also emphasized how much I valued their input (in my own, less formal / more personal way than the official email). Finally, the day before the final class I sent an announcement saying if everyone filled them out at home the night before, we would have more time in class to review exam material. I think that is what convinced people.”
- “I mention it several times in classes, that it's important, and that I don't care if it's positive or negative. I affirm that I always try to learn from the negatives to do a better job, so their feedback helps their peers, it isn't just about the professor. Then I monitor the return rate and send periodic 'box scores' to all students in all courses, turning it into a horse race to see which class will get to 100% the fastest. Basically, the reminders are persistent but lighthearted and all students get them rather than segmenting by class.”
- “(a) ...[I remind them that] the on line system is environmentally friendly. I ask the students if they would really prefer to sit in a classroom to fill in papers that take up class time and which doesn't always give them confidentiality (b)I tell them that it is a valuable process. During the extent of the course I evaluate them....now they have a chance to evaluate me, so it is an egalitarian process! They usually nod their heads in agreement when I say that!! (c) I impress on them what an important process it is and is highly valued. (d) I try to make it sound like a very special Parsons undertaking...not a chore...and that they should enjoy going on line to complete the evaluations.”