



Research Article

Identifying motivators and barriers to student completion of instructor evaluations: A multi-faceted, collaborative approach from four colleges of pharmacy



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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify motivators and barriers to pharmacy student completion of instructor evaluations, and to develop potential strategies to improve the evaluation process.

Methods: Completed at four Ohio Colleges of Pharmacy, Phase I consisted of a student/faculty survey and Phase II consisted of joint student/faculty focus groups to discuss Phase I data and to problem solve.

Results: In Phase I, the top three student-identified and faculty-perceived motivators to completion of evaluations were to (1) make the course better, (2) earn bonus points, and (3) improve the instructor's teaching. The top three student-identified barriers to completion of evaluations were having to (1) evaluate multiple instructors, (2) complete several evaluations around the same time, and (3) complete lengthy evaluations. Phase II focus groups identified a number of potential ways to enhance the motivators and reduce barriers, including but not limited to making sure faculty convey to students that the feedback they provide is useful and to provide examples of how student feedback has been used to improve their teaching/the course.

Conclusions: Students and faculty identified motivators and barriers to completing instructor evaluations and were willing to work together to improve the process.

Introduction

Student evaluation of instruction is the most prevalent factor in assessing teaching effectiveness at the university level.¹ Results of these evaluations may affect an instructor's career advancement, promotion, and/or tenure.² Therefore, student completion of instructor evaluations is critical in evaluating teaching quality.³ Most universities previously distributed paper surveys in the classroom for students to complete instructor evaluations, but this process can be costly, time-consuming, and inconvenient.⁴ Recently, many universities have stopped printing forms and now electronically disperse student evaluations of instruction. There are benefits to the online approach including less paper, ease of administration, reduced processing time, and reduced costs.⁵ However, there are also obstacles to online assessments; the most notable one is obtaining adequate student response rates.⁶ The use

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of online ratings has had a negative effect on response rates, which can cause one to question the validity of the data.⁷ There is also the belief by instructors that students are more compelled to complete hardcopy instructor evaluations. A study by Crews and Curtis⁸ examined faculty perspectives when a college in a large, southeastern university mandated instructors shift from paper to online course evaluations. Researchers found that although instructors preferred paper versus online evaluations only by a small margin, faculty overwhelmingly believed paper evaluations result in higher student response rates.⁸

This shift downward in student response rates has called into question motivating factors and barriers to completing instructor evaluations. Donovan et al.⁵ studied student preferences for traditional versus online course evaluations at a large midwestern public university and found the biggest motivator for student completion of evaluations was convenience, followed by anonymity and accessibility. Other motivators can include incentives and the altruistic notion that the student feedback provided will improve teaching. The previously mentioned study by Crews and Curtis⁸ revealed the majority of surveyed faculty members believe awarding extra credit and explaining the importance of evaluations are two factors that result in higher student response rates. Giesey et al.⁹ evaluated key factors that motivated engineering students to participate in the teaching evaluation process. Using expectancy theory, which provides a model for individual motivation, they discovered that students generally consider the improvement of teaching as the most important outcome of teaching evaluations. This was followed by improvement of course content and format, then sharing the evaluation results for students' decisions on course and instructor selection. The least important use was influencing a professor's tenure, promotion, and salary raise.

Potential barriers to students completing instructor evaluations also exist, such as survey fatigue. Survey fatigue is a component of respondent burden and could be due to a number of reasons including, but not limited to (1) the fact that students are asked to complete instructor evaluations all at the same time in the term (poor timing/coordination), (2) some courses that have multiple instructors, (3) completion of the survey(s) are not required and (4) some of the survey instruments can be quite long.¹⁰ Porter et al.¹⁰ found that survey fatigue may have the most significant impact on completion of surveys when students are given evaluations back-to-back. Beyond survey fatigue, other noted barriers to students evaluating instructors include student concern over anonymity and confidentiality, as well as issues with student computer access and software incompatibilities if the survey is distributed online.^{8,11}

Iqbal et al.¹² have recently published their qualitative study examining student and faculty perceptions surrounding online student evaluation of teaching. Using one-on-one interviews with student “completers” ($n = 7$) and “non-completers” ($n = 6$) of student evaluations and 12 faculty members, they identified motivators and barriers to engaging in the evaluation process. Not surprisingly, students were motivated to engage when they felt that faculty acted upon student feedback. Barriers included the timing of when surveys were presented in the term and the amount of surveys that students were asked to complete. Faculty showed more willingness to use the student data when the response rates were high and when their administrators acknowledged the survey results.

Despite the aforementioned studies, there is little in the education literature and even less in the Health Sciences that simultaneously examines both student and faculty perspectives of why students take or disregard the opportunity to complete instructor evaluations. This literature gap highlights the fact that this is an area ripe for discovery. Therefore, the objective of this project was to identify motivators and barriers to pharmacy student completion of instructor evaluations.

Methods

This teaching research project targeted both pharmacy students and faculty at four Ohio Colleges of Pharmacy: Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED), Ohio Northern University, Ohio State University, and University of Cincinnati. Institutional review board (IRB) approval for the study was obtained at each institution, including a waiver of written consent. Filling out the survey was the consent to participate. Because the procedures for evaluating faculty and courses at each of the four colleges are similar and evaluations are used in a similar manner, we considered our sample to be homogenous from this perspective.

This study consisted of two phases. Phase I consisted of gathering opinions of pharmacy students and faculty in regards to instructor evaluations. Based on the literature, two separate, but similarly worded, surveys were developed and pilot-tested by four pharmacy residents for clarity. The survey was not validated. The surveys consisted of Likert-type scale response and open-ended questions, along with demographic questions. Investigators at each of the four Colleges were responsible for inviting their students and faculty to complete the surveys.

Student survey

The student survey consisted of 22 questions that were divided into three main sections as follows: motivators for completing instructor evaluations, barriers to completing instructor evaluations, and demographics. The motivators section included five Likert-type questions using the scale of “not a motivator at all” to “very strong motivator.” The barriers section included six Likert-type questions using the scale “not a barrier at all” to “very large barrier.” Four demographic questions were asked including age, gender, year in school and college/school of pharmacy attended. Out of concern for not getting an adequate number of student responses via email invitation, student data were collected by a hardcopy survey at the beginning or end of a required class. Students in their first, second, or third professional year (for 2–4 and 4–4 programs) or third, fourth, or fifth year (for 0–6 programs) were recruited. Students currently on Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experiences (APPEs) were excluded. The two-page survey included a cover letter which outlined the rationale behind the project and the IRB required wording.

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