

April 5, 2011

To: John W. Powell
Chairperson, Executive Committee of Academic Council

From: Gillian Bice
Chairperson, University Committee on Academic Policy

RE: UCAP Report and Recommendation – Administration of Online SIRS

Cc: Doug Estry, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education
Jackie Wright, Secretary for Academic Governance

On January 28, 2010, the University Committee on Academic Policy (UCAP) formed an ad hoc subcommittee to begin a review of the online Student Instructional Rating System (SIRS) processes. The subcommittee subsequently implemented a pilot study (US10, FS10, SS11) of the online SIRS process intended to answer two basic questions regarding the administration of online SIRS:

- 1) Can student response rate to the online SIRS be increased through grade sequestration?
- 2) Can the online SIRS form be customized?

At its March 30, 2011 meeting, the full committee endorsed the following recommendation of the subcommittee (subcommittee report appended to this memo):

The UCAP Subcommittee on Online SIRS unanimously recommends implementation of grade sequestration in the administration of online SIRS.

UCAP encourages adoption of this practice as soon as is practicable.

The results of the pilot study support the use of best practices with regard to communication with students in the administration of online SIRS with grade sequestration (i.e., inclusion in the syllabus, explication during the course introductory lecture, and email reminders during the course). UCAP also encourages units participating in online SIRS to take advantage of the ability to customize the online SIRS form when appropriate.

UCAP SIRS Subcommittee Report – Results of Pilot Study and Recommendation Regarding Administration of Online SIRS

Recommendation

The UCAP Subcommittee on Online SIRS unanimously recommends implementation of grade sequestration in the administration of online SIRS. Based on results of a pilot study conducted during US10 and FS10, this modification will likely substantially improve student response rate, and therefore representativeness, in assessing course/instructional quality for units that choose to utilize the online SIRS process.

Background

MSU Student Instructional Rating System (SIRS) policy states that instructional evaluation is “indispensable to implementation of the University's policy of providing its students with instruction of the highest quality”, and requires that every teaching unit shall “approve one or more common student rating instruments through its own channels of participation, in accordance with unit bylaws and customs of collegial decision making.”

Section 4.4.4 of the MSU Bylaws charges the University Committee on Academic Policy (UCAP) with the responsibility to “consult with the Provost on the ... evaluation of instruction.”

A majority of teaching units on campus gathers student opinion of instructional quality using a standard SIRS form, administered in class during the last weeks of the semester. This process cannot ensure that all students enrolled in a course are canvassed due to factors such as variability in attendance.

A minority of units utilizes the online SIRS system. Online course evaluations have the potential to increase efficiency by minimizing the staff required to administer the SIRS process and reducing costs associated with paper SIRS. In addition, this is the only viable option for online courses. The number of units inquiring about using the online SIRS has been increasing and, given the projected period of budget austerity, it is likely that the number of units using online SIRS will continue to rise.

UCAP reviewed the current online SIRS system, and noted two specific deficiencies in its implementation at MSU:

1. The online response rate averages between 25-30% in most undergraduate courses. The committee notes that with such a low response rate, the results of the evaluation may not accurately reflect the views of the class, rendering the results unreliable for the evaluation of instruction.
2. The online SIRS form is not customizable, therefore it is not possible to ask questions specific to an individual unit. The committee notes that this is of particular concern in hybrid and online courses in which an evaluation of the online aspects of the course could be particularly informative.

Modification of the Online SIRS Process

UCAP was interested in evaluating the effectiveness of two modifications to the online SIRS to address the above noted deficiencies:

1. Increasing the online SIRS response rate by providing an incentive for students to go online to complete the “SIRS process”, either by filling out the form or specifically declining to do so. The proposal, patterned after a process used at Yale University, is to keep the online SIRS process open for one week after the completion of the course and to require that students complete the “SIRS process” to gain access to their final grades during that time. After one week beyond the end of the course, the online SIRS process would close and students would have unrestricted access to their final grades.
2. Provide the ability for units to customize the online SIRS for to incorporate questions that are unit specific.

Implementation Details for Pilot Project

UCAP implemented the proposed modifications in several online and face-to-face courses taught during summer semester 2010. The committee determined that the modified online SIRS process, coupled with access to grades, would need to be communicated in the course syllabus and clearly explained to all students early in the course. Hence, the subcommittee made it a priority to identify units for collaboration that were already participating in online SIRS and that agreed to fully implement the communication protocol (i.e., explain the goals and parameters of the pilot project to students).

The subcommittee communicated the above information to the department chair and instructors of all pilot project courses. Instructors in the pilot project courses were asked to do the following:

- a. Provide up to five additional questions to be added to the standard online SIRS form specific to the unit, and to verify unit approval of these modifications.
- b. Discuss the importance of student evaluation of instruction in their introductory course sessions.
- c. Explain the online SIRS pilot project, including sequestration of pilot project course grades, in their course syllabus. *Sample syllabus language provided in an appendix below.*
- d. Discuss in class the online SIRS pilot project again two weeks prior to the last class meeting, when the online SIRS process opens.

The subcommittee discussed technical details of the pilot project with AIS, and they agreed to the following modifications in order to facilitate the pilot project:

- Online SIRS forms were customized for those departments participating in the pilot project. For the US10 pilot project, the modifications were additive, and departments had the option of providing up to five additional custom questions to be added to the standard form.
- The online SIRS entry page for each student listed all enrolled courses with participating courses identified by the tag “SIRS Pilot”. This same nomenclature was used in reminder emails and the notification email sent when the online SIRS became available.
- The online SIRS forms for pilot project courses was modified to include an explanation of the pilot project parameters, i.e. the sequestration of final grades for pilot project

courses for up to a week unless students complete the online SIRS process by filling out the form or actively declining to do so.

- The “submit form” and “decline to participate” buttons were moved to the end of the form.
- The online SIRS process for pilot project courses was open one week longer than for non-participating courses, i.e. one week beyond the date course grades were submitted. As in the current online SIRS process, in order to ensure that student feedback did not influence grading, feedback to instructors was anonymous. Pilot project online SIRS feedback was returned to instructors only after the online SIRS process closed one week after pilot project course grades were submitted. Similarly, to ensure that student feedback was not influenced by final grades, online SIRS data collection was not possible once students’ grades were available on STUINFO.
- For students in a pilot project course, STUINFO was modified to implement the sequestration of pilot project course grades while the online SIRS process remained open and until a student completed the online SIRS process (e.g., either completing the form or actively declining to do so). STUINFO reverted to normal operation after closure of the online SIRS process.
- Students with sequestered pilot project course grades were provided a link to the online SIRS so they could complete the online SIRS process as soon as it was available.

Results of Summer 2010 Pilot Study

The SIRS subcommittee, chaired by Jim Smith, presented results of the 2010 study on September 23, 2010 to UCAP and to ECAC on November 2, 2010 (documents are available under Supporting Documents tab on UCAP website: ucap.msu.edu).

Question: Did grade sequestration positively impact online SIRS student response rate?

Answer: YES

1. Overall online SIRS response increased from **27.45% (US09)** to **87.98% (US10)**.
 - US09: N = 1508 students; 414 responded
 - US10: N = 1015 students; 893 responded*

*Both completion of the form AND declining to complete the form counted as a response.
2. Increased response rate was observed in all 18 participating course sections that were offered in both US09 and US10.
3. *Increase* in response rates ranged from 26% to 74%.

Question: Did students with lower course grades respond disproportionately?

Answer: If so, students with lower course grades were underrepresented.

- In general, students who responded to the online SIRS received a higher course grade than students who did not respond (US09 and US10).

Question: How many online SIRS questions did students actually answer?

Answer: Almost all.

- On average, students in the Pilot Study responded to **95.2%** of the online SIRS questions (standard bubble questions).

Based on these results, UCAP redeployed the pilot study in Fall Semester 2010 to determine whether the dramatic results were replicable. Additionally, the FS10 study tested whether the excellent results could be explained by the increased emphasis on communication regarding the online SIRS process or if sequestration of grades was the primary factor.

Results of Fall 2010 Pilot Study

Question: Did grade sequestration positively impact online SIRS student response rate?

Answer: YES

- Overall online SIRS response increased from **25.86% (FS09)** to **86.8% (FS10)**.
 - ✓ FS09: N = 28,586 students; 7628 responded
 - ✓ FS10: N = 12,532 students; 10,876 responded*
- *Both completion of the form AND declining to complete the form counted as a response.

Question: Did the communication protocol significantly influence response rate?

Answer: Not particularly, grade sequestration does seem to be the primary variable influencing response rate

- Overall online SIRS response was **33.2% (FS10)**.
 - ✓ FS10: N = 3729 students; 1239 responded

Question: How many online SIRS questions did students actually answer?

Answer: Almost all.

- On average, students in the Pilot Study responded to **92.9%** of the online SIRS questions (Including standard bubble questions and open ended questions).

Spring 2011 Study

Question: Can online SIRS forms be customized?

Answer: YES

- AIS created an interface allowing units to customize their online SIRS forms. This is being tested by IAH in Spring 2011.

Composition of UCAP SIRS Subcommittee 2011: Tom Morse, Ron Perry, John Reifenberg, Mary Kay Smith

*Special thanks to contributions of Jim Smith and Sekhar Chivukula, former UCAP members and SIRS Subcommittee Chairs, Dr. Doug Estry, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education and Sandra Walther, Executive Staff Assistant to Dr. Estry.

Appendix: Sample Syllabus Language for Pilot Program Course Evaluation

Michigan State University takes seriously the opinion of students in the evaluation of the effectiveness of instruction, and has implemented the **SIRS** (Student Instructional Rating System) process to gather student feedback. This course utilizes the “online SIRS” system, and you will receive an e-mail sometime during the last two weeks of class asking you to fill out the SIRS webform at your convenience. This course is enrolled in the “SIRS Pilot” project and, as a

reminder to be sure to fill out the SIRS evaluation form, the final grade for this course will not be accessible on STUINFO during the week following the submission of grades for this course unless the SIRS online form has been filled out. You have the option on the online SIRS form to decline to participate in the evaluation of the course – we hope, however, that you will be willing to give us your frank and constructive feedback so that we may instruct students even better in the future.