

# Results of Deliberative Poll on Faculty Course Evaluations

Submitted By

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## Preface

Campus Conversations has worked with the Faculty Senate and the Faculty Senate's Committee on Faculty Course Evaluations to design and deliver a deliberative poll on FCEs. The results of this poll can serve as an additional source of information for many of those on campus who are making recommendations to the Provost on the format and use of the FCE, the Faculty Senate being among them.

The goals of Campus Conversations are threefold: to highlight the virtues of diversity (of gender, ethnicity, and intellectual background) as these are embedded in the nature of deliberative polls and other forms of democratic dialogue, to build a sense of campus community and create social capital within the student body and amongst faculty, students and staff, and to provide new tools for dissemination and feedback on issues of importance to the campus community.

The following is an analysis of the results of the September 20, 2006, Campus Conversation on Faculty Course Evaluations. More information on this event, including copies of the background materials, can be found on the CC website ([caae.phil.cmu.edu/cc/](http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/cc/)).

## Findings: Quantitative Analysis

**Sample.** Participants were drawn from two broad populations: faculty and students. For each population, a random sample of 600 was invited to participate. In addition, convenience samples of faculty and students were solicited through posters, word of mouth and personal invitations.

**Demographics.** Selected demographic characteristics of the faculty and student samples are specified below.

Table 1. Number of Participants (Response Rate)

	Random Sample	Convenience Sample	Combined Sample
Students	18 (3.0%)	23	41
Faculty	25 (4.2%)	4	29
Total	43 (3.6%)	27	70

Caveat. With response rates in the random samples below 5%, the representative nature of the samples is of concern. In essence, the random samples suffer from the same self-selection biases that traditionally characterize any convenience sample. Therefore, the random and convenience samples were combined to create two samples – the student sample and the faculty sample. *Generalizability to the broader student and faculty populations cannot be assumed.*

Table 2. Percentage of Faculty and Students by College

	Student Participants (%)	CMU Student Population (%)	Faculty Participants (%)	CMU Faculty Population (%)
CFA	17.1	17.0	10.3	14.5
CIT	12.2	29.1	13.8	15.8
Heinz	0	0	3.4	5.0
HSS	31.7	19.0	31.0	22.9
MCS	14.6	12.8	24.1	16.3
SCS	14.6	9.7	17.2	14.2
TSB	7.3	7.8	0	10.9
Other	2.4	0	0	0

Representation at the college level constituted very small sample sizes. Thus, valid characterization of results between colleges is not warranted.

Table 3. Percentage of Students by Class

	Student Participants (%)	CMU Student Population (%)
First year	38.9	25.8
Soph	38.9	24.7
Jr.	5.6	23.3
Sr	16.7	25.8
5th	0	.02

Table 4. Percentage of Faculty Participants by Track

	Faculty Participants (%)
Teaching	24.1
Research	3.4
Tenure	65.5
Other	6.9
Teaching	24.1

Table 5. Percentage of Faculty Participants by Rank

	Faculty Participants (%)
Professor	41.1
Associate	27.6

Assistant	13.8
Adj./Spec./Oth	17.2

## RESULTS

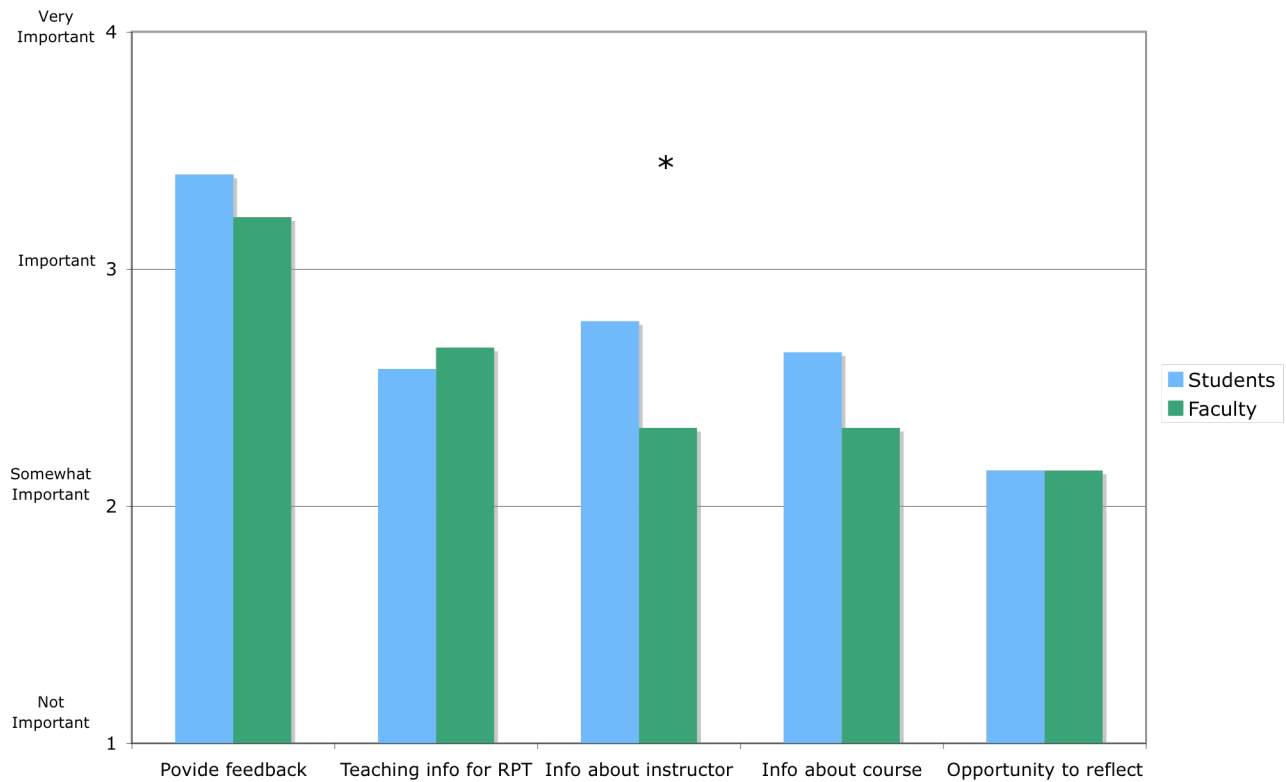
Two surveys were administered to participants during the Deliberative Poll. The first, pre-poll survey was distributed before the formal deliberation took place. Participants completed a second, post-poll survey during the final discussion meeting at the end of the Deliberative Poll. Parallel questions were administered in the pre-and post-poll surveys.

Because results between pre and post survey responses generally failed to demonstrate significant differences and because the post survey results reflect beliefs and opinions informed by the Deliberative Poll process, this document largely reports results from the follow-up (post-poll) survey. In instances where pre/post trends are of particular interest, data from both surveys are presented.

Function of FCE. Participants were asked to indicate the importance of the following functions of the FCE.

- a. To provide feedback to instructors so they can improve their teaching
- b. To provide a source of information about an instructor's teaching for promotion and tenure decisions
- c. To provide students with information about an instructor
- d. To provide students with information about a course
- e. To provide students with an opportunity to reflect about their learning in a course

### Functions of FCEs



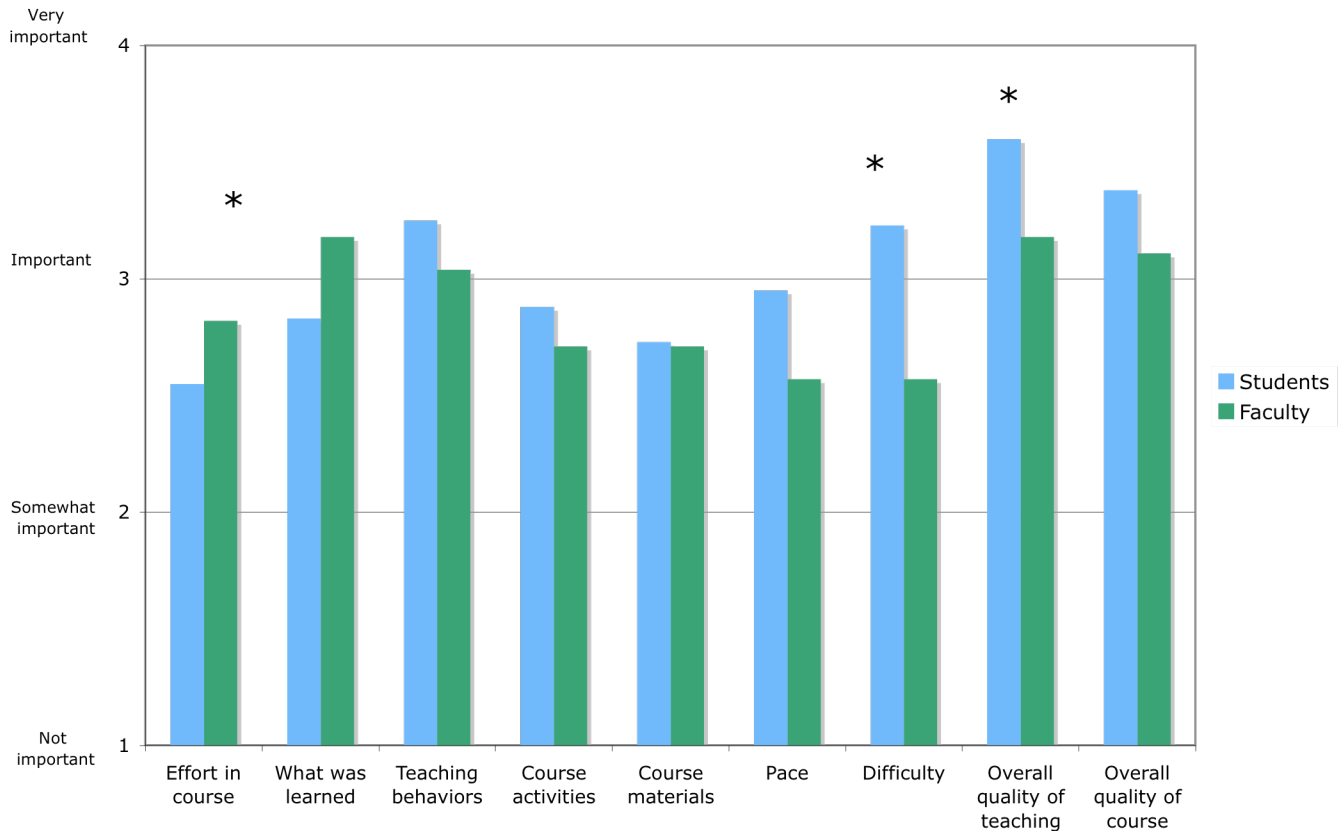
\* Significant difference between students and faculty,  $p < .05$

As this chart demonstrates, participants indicated that the FCE's most important function is to provide feedback to instructor to facilitate improvement in teaching. Indeed, faculty and students agreed on this issue. A full 92.5% of students and 77.7% of faculty found this function to be "important" or "very important." This chart also demonstrates that faculty and students view the FCE as serving a variety of simultaneous functions. Moreover, outside of the primary function of providing feedback to improve teaching, the relative importance of the other functions were moderate and similar.

Dimensions of Evaluation. The FCE asks student to evaluate several dimensions of their classroom experience. Participants were asked to indicate how important it is for the FCE to evaluate each of those dimensions. They included:

- a. The student's effort in the course
- b. What the student learned
- c. Teaching behaviors
- d. Course activities
- e. Course materials
- f. Pace of course
- g. Difficulty of course
- h. Overall quality of the teaching
- i. Overall quality of the course

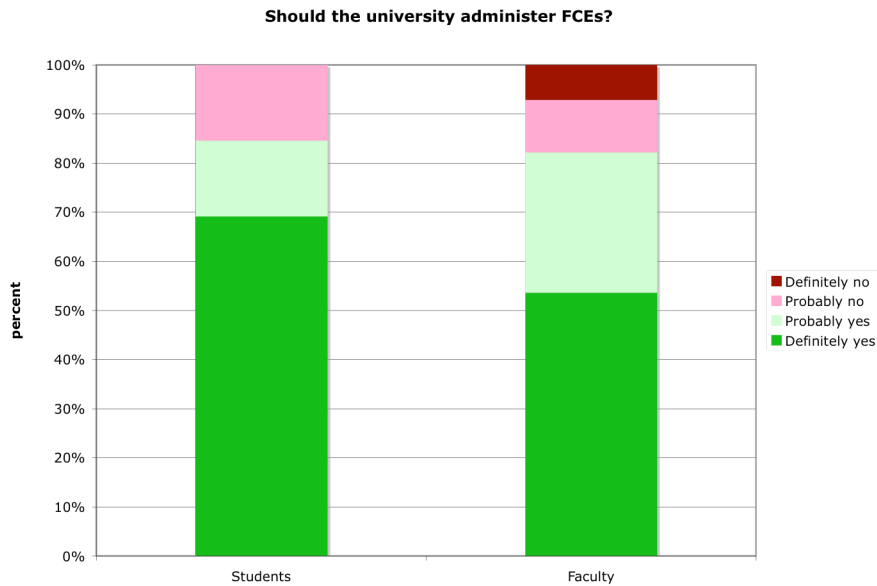
### Dimensions of Evaluation



- Significant difference between students and faculty,  $p < .05$

Length is a frequent complaint leveled at the current online version of the FCE. This chart represents the relative importance of the various dimension in the current FCE. Of note are the perceived importance of the overall teaching and overall course items. Indeed, students tended to find those dimensions more important than faculty. The general trend of students identifying greater importance to a specific dimension was seen across all dimensions except *effort in course* and *what was learned*. For these two dimensions, faculty indicated greater importance than students.

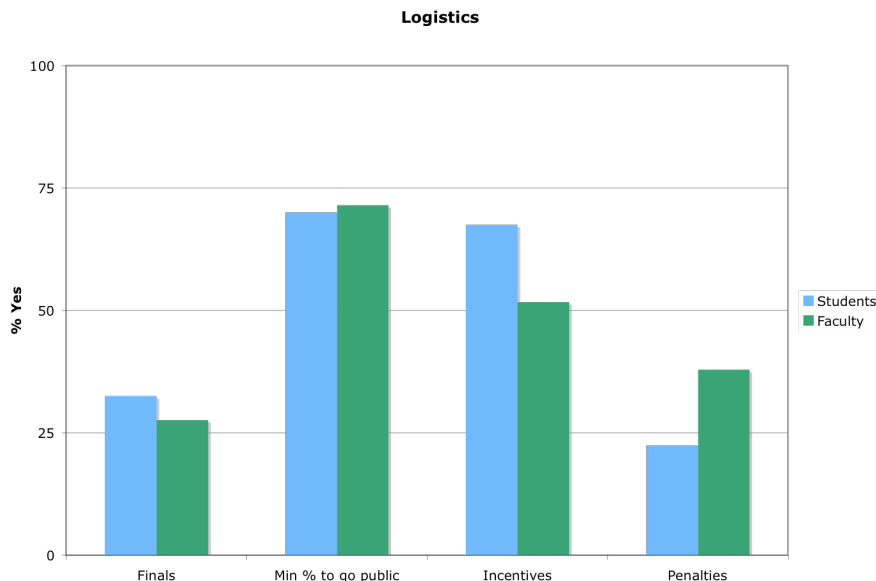
Should the university administer FCEs? Participants were asked to indicate if they thought the university should administer FCEs.



Consistent with the findings of the Faculty Senate FCE Survey, an overwhelming majority of student and faculty thought that the university should administer FCE. This was especially true of student participants, among whom, no one endorsed the *definitely no* response option.

Logistics of Administration. Participants were asked about various logistic considerations for the administration of FCEs. In particular, they were asked if they thought that...

- the administration period of the FCEs should include the week of finals
- there should be a minimum percentage of students in a class who respond to the FCEs in order for the results for that class to be made public
- there should be an incentive (e.g., money, credit, etc.) for students to complete the FCE for a minimum percentage of their courses
- there should be a penalty (e.g., a fine, delayed access to OLR, no access to university-wide FCE results, etc.) for students who fail to complete the FCEs for a minimum percentage of their courses



In terms of logistics, few participants endorsed the delivery of FCEs during finals week. In contrast, nearly 75% of both faculty and students supported the idea that there should be a minimum percentage of students who complete the FCE in a class for the results of that class to be made public. Indeed, this practice may help insure a minimum percentage of FCE responses to establish a more valid evaluation of teaching and may help motivate students to complete the FCEs.

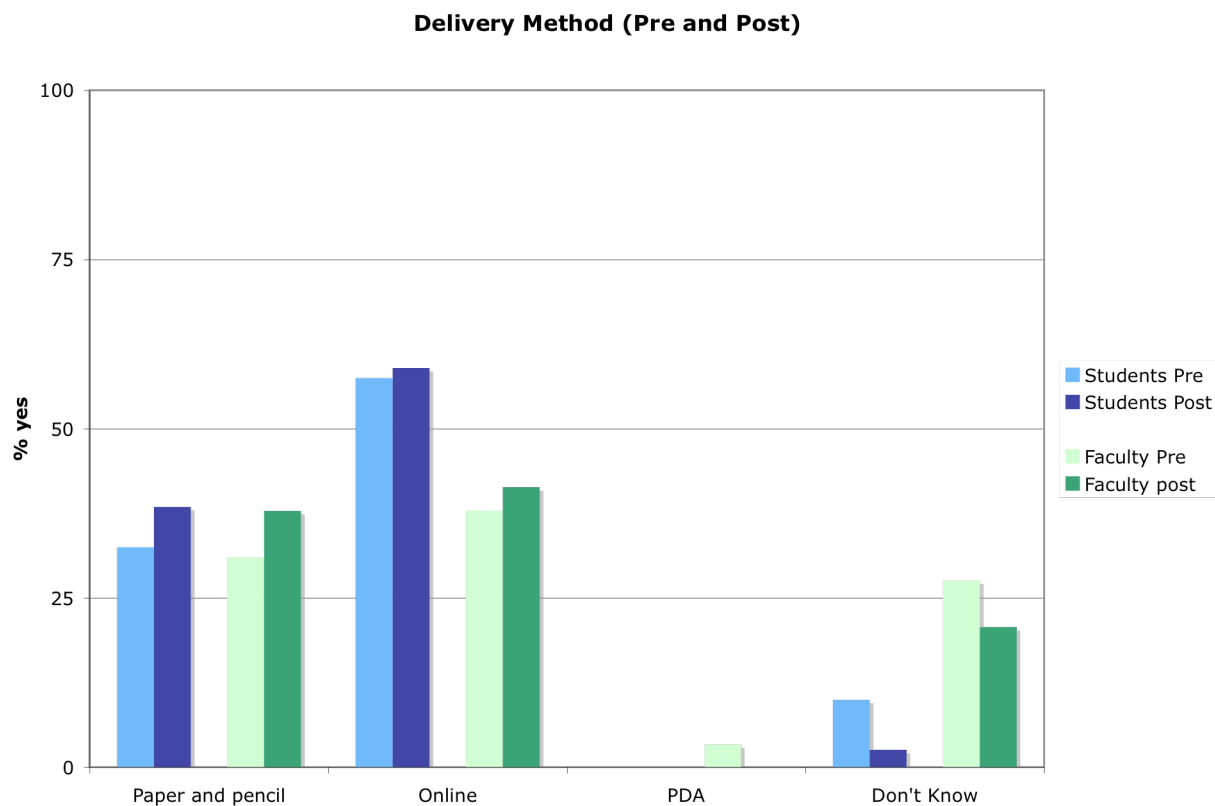
Length of FCE. Participants were asked how long it should ideally take to complete an FCE for one course.

	Students	Faculty
Average (minutes)	7.36	9.36
Standard dev.	3.8	6.0
Median (minutes)	7.0	7.0

Students saw the ideal FCE taking somewhat less time than the faculty. This may reflect the student's concerns over the time necessary to complete multiple FCEs and their work load at the end of the semester.

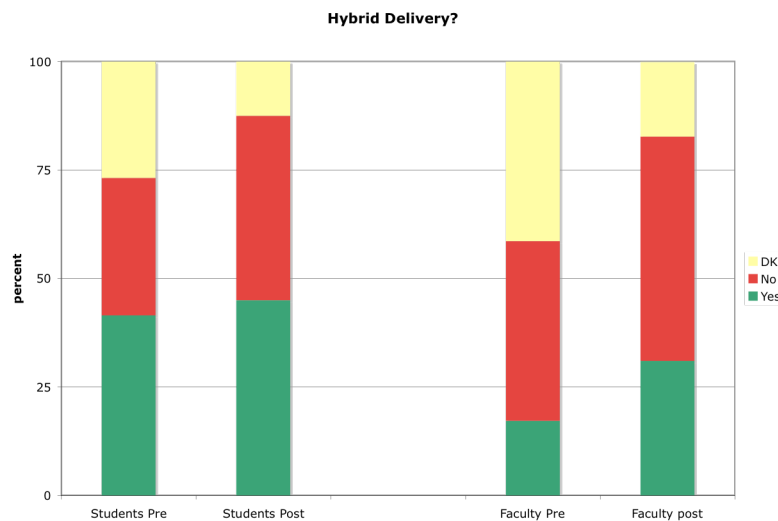
Method of Delivery. Participants were asked to indicate the best mode of delivery for the FCE. Response options included:

- a. paper and pencil
- b. online
- c. cell phone / PDA / other mobile technology
- d. don't know



This chart presents pre- and post-poll data for the preferred method of delivery among faculty and students. Students had a clear preference for online delivery. Faculty had a much more mixed response. Nearly an equal percentage endorsed online and paper and pencil delivery. Of note is the fact that a substantial percentage of the faculty did not endorse paper and pencil or online delivery. Rather, 20.7% indicated that they didn't know the best method of delivery. This uncertainty may reflect the faculty's broader understanding of the multi-functional nature of the FCE and the complex set of issues that surround its delivery and use.

Hybrid Delivery Method. Participants were asked if a hybrid method of delivery in which each college would choose its own method of administration would be better than having a single, university-wide method of delivery. (DK = Don't Know)

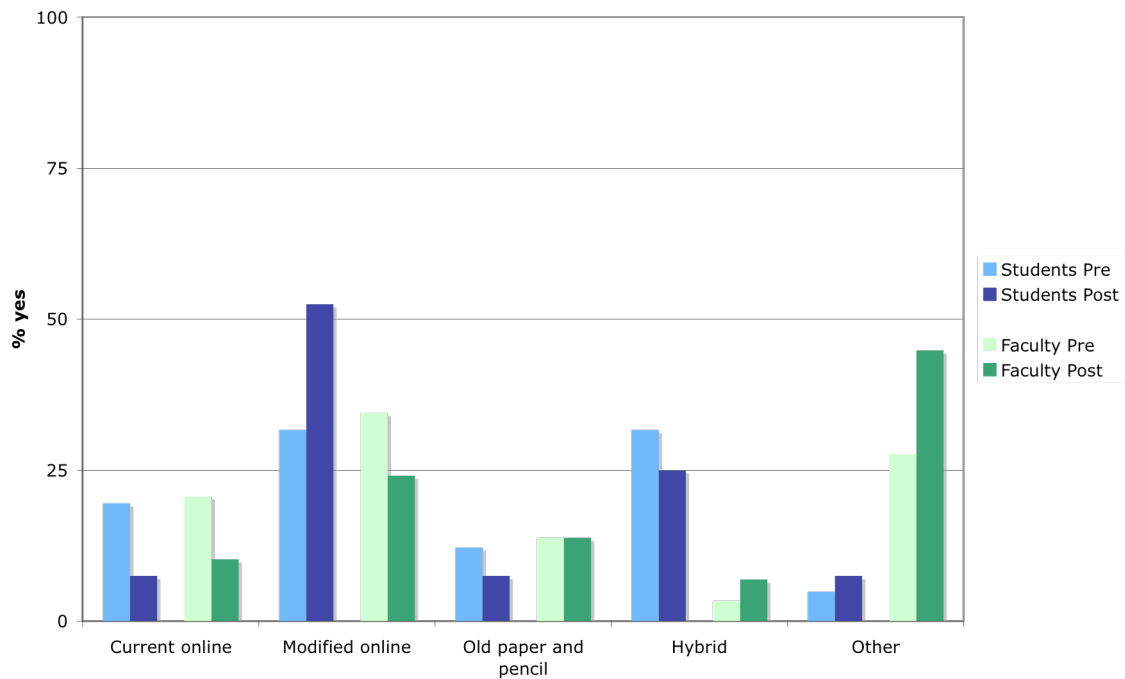


As this chart demonstrates, students were much more likely to support a hybrid method of delivery than faculty. For both faculty and students, the level of uncertainty decreased following participation in the poll. In both groups however, support for a hybrid method of delivery (defined at the college level) failed to reach a majority.

FCE Decision. Participants were asked to consider all the issues related to FCEs and indicate which course of action they thought the university should follow. Data represent pre-and post-poll results. Response options included:

- a. Keep the current online, university-wide instrument as it is
- b. Administer a modified version of the current online, university-wide instrument
- c. Return to paper-and-pencil delivery of the old, university-wide instrument
- d. Implement a hybrid system where each college selects its own instrument of method of delivery
- e. Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Decision pre and post



Two prominent aspects of this chart should be noted. First, students overwhelmingly supported delivery of a modified version of the online instrument. Indeed, the suggestions for focused on a shortened, more focused online version. Second, among faculty there appeared to be a great deal of variability regarding what course of action the university should follow. Nearly 45% of the faculty indicated an “other” course of action. Those responses are specified below.

Stop doing them until we are clear about what we hope to get out of them and at what cost.

Administer a very brief paper and pencil version.

Shorter survey

Allow different schools or departments to craft their own FCEs.

Don't know

Provide a mechanism for online submission of formative feedback from student at intervals considered appropriate by course instructor.

Current instrument may be alright, though the administering method should be changed. i.e., it should be collected in a more controlled environment – (as in the old method) – such as a fixed time, etc.

Peer review for purposes of promotion and tenure, FCEs to give students information about courses and Blackboard for instructors to receive information about improving teaching from the student point of perspective.

Have students administer FCEs

Online, old instrument

1. Consider seriously the question: Are they worth doing? 2. Vastly simplify and shorten and on paper. 3. Don't overrate the "rigor" possible for FCEs (i.e., it's not much at all.)

Scanner paper version in class

The current instrument should be modified (shortened and simplified) AND a hybrid system of deliver should be implemented to satisfy the specific needs of different colleges

Use three different instruments, one for each of: a. feedback to instructors, b. feedback to students and, c. feedback to admin.

**First Conclusions.** While the sample size from this deliberative poll prevents generalization to the broader student and faculty populations, it does offer an additional source of data to complement data gathered from focus groups and town meetings. General results suggest:

- Students and faculty overwhelmingly endorsed the university administration of FCEs.
- Student and faculty strongly supported the idea of establishing a *minimum percentage* of respondents in a class in order for the FCE results from that class to be public.
- Students generally favored an online delivery method.
- Students preferred a *modified* version of the current instrument.
- Faculty appeared to have lingering uncertainty about the best method of delivery and the instrument but offer reserved support for an online or alternative method of administration.

## **Findings: Qualitative Analysis**

As a result of the Campus Conversation on the issue of Faculty Course Evaluations, students and faculty provided important qualitative feedback about the FCE process. The overarching themes that emerged from their deliberation and personal reflection include: the need for more information about the FCEs, improved student education regarding the use and importance of the FCEs, concern that FCEs are not the proper instrument for use as a decision-making criterion for faculty tenure and promotion, and the notion that the FCEs are trying to accomplish too much.

The call for more information regarding FCEs as an instrument and a process is of the utmost concern. Roughly 28% of individuals, both students and faculty combined, who offered additional comments indicated the need for the discovery and distribution of clear and complete information. The campus community seeks to understand the purpose and justification for the design, execution, and use of the FCEs at Carnegie Mellon. In addition, the need to provide students with accurate information as to the use of their FCE feedback, and the importance of this data in strengthening Carnegie Mellon as a learning community, is essential. Without appropriate knowledge and awareness of the FCE, not

only might response rates continue to be low, but also the value of the results to the community as a whole may be less than optimal.

The concern that the FCE is not the proper instrument for both evaluating the quality and effectiveness of instructors, as well as providing a criterion for decisions of tenure and promotion, highlights many specific problems perceived by the Carnegie Mellon community. About 34% of individuals who provided comments feel that the FCE is unsatisfactory. To remedy this problem, those polled recommend a shorter more customizable format, and that questions address issues that are more fundamental. There is concern that using the same evaluative tool for professional development of instructors as well as decisions of tenure and promotion is inappropriate and unreliable; there is a perceived conflict between seeking honest feedback to improve instructor quality and soliciting feedback for the purpose of job security. Similarly, the quality of the instructor and the rigor of the course may work against each other in generating accurate feedback as to the overall success of an instructor.

These comments illustrate a general notion that the FCE, as implemented currently, is trying to accomplish too many goals with one instrument, rendering that instrument weak at best in providing valuable results to the community. If the purpose of Faculty Course Evaluations is to promote best teaching practices and foster better learning environments, some more fundamental questions must be addressed. If the purpose of Faculty Course Evaluations is to provide one criterion in decisions of tenure and promotion, the set of questions might look all together different. With more information, education, and clarity as to the design, use, and execution of the FCEs, their value to Carnegie Mellon as a learning community would be far greater.

## **Interpretive Analysis**

Detailed analysis of participant and observer comments from the September Campus Conversation on FCEs provides us with an interesting opportunity to interpret the deliberative poll report.

Over and over again participants noted the conflated nature of the FCEs as attempting to provide three functions: a way for students to see how courses are evaluated by other students; a way to provide 'formative feedback to professors' for improvements to their courses; and an assessment of teaching to be used in faculty Tenure and Promotion cases.

Reviewing comments by faculty and students as well as reports from moderators and facilitators, a consensus seemed to emerge: Instruments and delivery mechanisms should emerge to handle each of these functions separately. FCEs of the kind proposed by the Faculty Committee and approved by the Faculty Senate would provide students with general information about courses and, perhaps, red flags to faculty and administrators in extreme and consistent cases. There was majority support for this to be provided by the University and delivered online. But the real issue in the comments was function and use, not online verses paper (even technology-enhanced scan sheets and pdf files to image comments).

More detailed and customized FCEs for the purpose of course feedback and improvement should be used by departments and individual faculty to more accurately assess the

teaching and learning process. These could be delivered as paper and pencil or embedded questions in a Blackboard anonymous-survey tool. Other, more sophisticated assessment tools could also be used at the discretion of the department (pre- and post- tests of learning outcomes, etc.). Finally, in addition to these feedback mechanisms, peer review and teaching portfolios could be utilized for purposes of Tenure and Promotion. These suggestions would be made at the college or department level.

Speaking generally, the Faculty Senate's recommendation fits with the deliberative poll's majority desire for the University to provide some online assessment mechanism. But the deliberations also point to a more complex role for FCEs. Participant comments recognize other forms of assessment and these in turn address concerns by Clark Glymour and others that rating 'course quality' and 'instructor quality' puts pressure on faculty to adjust their courses and teaching to the outcome of the FCE. Under this tripartite reading of the content and delivery of FCEs, the other forms of assessment should trump 'Rate-the-Professor' results in cases of divergence.