

## **Recommendation to adopt Online Course Evaluation format for MSU Student Instructional Rating System (SIRS)**

### **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.”

The majority of teaching units on campus gather student input in instructional evaluation using a standard SIRS form, administered in class during the last weeks of the term. While the standard SIRS form incorporates a number of Likert scale questions, which are automatically scored by the use of a “bubble sheet”, it also incorporates a few “free response” questions which must be processed by hand. This process cannot insure that all students enrolled in a course are canvassed due to variability in attendance.

A minority of Departments utilize the online "SIRS" system. Online course evaluations have the potential to increase efficiency by minimizing the staff work required to administer the SIRS process. 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 grow in the future.

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

1. The online response rate is very low, between 25-30% in most undergraduate classes. The committee notes that with a self-selected response rate that low, the results of the evaluation do not necessarily accurately reflect the views of the entire class.
2. The online "SIRS" form is not customizable, and it is not possible for Departments or instructors to ask questions specific to the individual course. The committee notes that this is of particular concern in hybrid and online courses, where an evaluation of the online aspects of the course could be particularly informative.

### **Possible Modification of Online SIRS Process**

UCAP is interested in evaluating the effectiveness of two modifications to the online SIRS to address these deficiencies:

- A. Increasing the 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" if they wish to gain access to their final grades during that time. After one week beyond the end of the course, the SIRS process would close and students would have unrestricted access to their final grades. Students would have the opportunity to "decline" to complete the survey, which would allow immediate access to their grades

- B. Modification of the online SIRS form to incorporate questions that are department and course specific.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the above proposal, UCAP implemented the proposed modifications on a few online and face-to-face courses taught during summer 2010. The committee understood that this modified SIRS process, coupled to the access to grades, would need to be clearly explained to all students early in the course and incorporated into the course syllabus. Hence the subcommittee worked to find instructors willing to collaborate on this project, and in particular, instructors who would explain the goals and parameters of the pilot project to students.

### **Implementation Details for Pilot Project**

The subcommittee further communicated all of the information above to both the department chair and the instructors of all pilot project courses. Instructors in the pilot project courses were asked to do the following to participate in the pilot project to insure that students are properly informed:

- a. Provide up to five additional questions to be added to the standard SIRS form specific to their course section, and to verify Departmental approval of these modifications.
- b. Discuss the importance of student evaluation of instruction in their introductory course sessions.
- c. Explain the SIRS pilot project, and the sequestration of pilot project course grades while the SIRS process is open, in their course syllabus. *Sample syllabus language given in an appendix below.*
- d. Discuss the SIRS and the pilot project again in class two weeks before 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 to facilitate the pilot project:

- a. Online SIRS forms were customized for those departments participating in the pilot project. For the 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.
- b. The online SIRS entry page for students lists of all the courses that the student was enrolled in, and some students were enrolled in a pilot project course along with other courses. The courses in the pilot project were identified by the tag "SIRS Pilot" on this entry page, and this same nomenclature was used in the e-mails telling students that the online SIRS was available and in the reminder email messages as well.

- c. 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 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.
- d. The SIRS process for pilot project courses was open one week longer than for ordinary courses, i.e. one week beyond the date course grades were submitted. As in the current SIRS process, in order to ensure that student feedback did not influence grading, feedback to instructors was anonymous. Pilot project SIRS feedback was returned to instructors only after the SIRS process closed one week after pilot project course grades were submitted. Similarly, to ensure that student feedback was not influenced by final grades, SIRS data collection was not possible when that student’s grades were available on STUINFO.
- e. For students in a pilot project course, STUINFO was modified to implement the sequestration of pilot project course grades while the SIRS process remained open and until a student completed the SIRS process (which, again, meant either filling out the form or actively declining to do so), and then reverted to normal operation after the SIRS process closed. In particular, students whose pilot project course grades were sequestered were provided a link to online SIRS so they could immediately complete the SIRS process.

### **Results Summer 2010**

The SIRS subcommittee, chaired by Jim Smith, presented results of the 2010 study on Sept. 23, 2010 to UCAP and ECAC Nov. 2, 2010 (see Appendix II).

***Question: Did sequestering grades make a positive impact on completion of SIRS.***

***Answer: YES***

1. Overall online SIRS response increased from **27.45% (US09)** to **87.98% (US10)**.
  - a. Sample size US09: 1508 students, 414 filled out SIRS
  - b. Sample size US10: 1015 students, 893 filled out SIRS
2. SIRS response increased in all 18 course sections that were offered in both US09 and US10.
3. SIRS response increased rates ranged from 26 to 74 percentage points

***Question: Did students with lower course grades respond disproportionately?***

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

1. In general, students who responded to the online SIRS had better grades in the course than students who did not respond to the SIRS (US09 and US10).

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

***Answer: Almost all.***

1. On average, students in the Pilot Study responded to 95.2% of the SIRS questions (Standard Bubble Questions).

Based on these results, UCAP redeployed the pilot study in Fall 2010 to determine whether the dramatic results were repeatable or were an anomaly. Additionally, the Fall 2010 study tested whether the excellent results could be explained by the increased emphasis on talking to students about the online SIRS process or if the sequestration of grades was the primary factor.

## **Results Fall 2010**

***Question: Did sequestering grades make a positive impact on completion of SIRS.***

***Answer: YES***

1. Overall online SIRS response increased from **25.86% (US09)** to **86.8% (FS10)**.
  - a. Sample size FS09: 28586 students, 7628 filled out SIRS
  - b. Sample size FS10: 12532 students, 10876 filled out SIRS

***Question: Did using instructor emphasis only make a positive impact on completion of SIRS.***

***Answer: NO***

1. Overall online SIRS response was **33.2% (FS10)**.
  - a. Sample size FS10: 3729 students, 1239 filled out SIRS

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

***Answer: Almost all.***

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

Current Pilot Program:

AIS has created an interface to make it possible for units to customize their online SIRS forms that is being tested by IAH in Spring '11. If successful, this option will be given to units utilizing online SIRS.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, the UCAP Subcommittee on Online SIRS, unanimously recommends implementation of grade sequestration in online SIRS. This modification in the online format in administering SIRS will provide improved student response in assessing course quality for those units participating in online SIRS. We further recommend that units adopt this policy as standard procedure with the understanding that individual units may be given the option to add customized questions to their forms to address departmental and college needs as desired.

## **UCAP SIRS Subcommittee 2011:**

John Reifenberg, Mary Kay Smith, Ron Perry, Tom Morse

\*Special Thanks to reports and contributions made by 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.

### **Appendix I : Sample Syllabus Language for Pilot Program Courses**

**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.

### **Appendix II: Reaction of Faculty Council following presentation by Jim Smith on Nov 2, 2010.**

**“Approved Motion:** Affirms that statistically valid surveys of student ratings of instructional performance, whereas imperfect, are one essential component in the assessment of instructional quality. Faculty Council also finds that voluntary online surveys are in general too suspect statistically to fill this role. Therefore, Faculty Council finds that voluntary online surveys are not in general suitable vehicles for fulfilling this role regardless of their budgetary appeal, and Faculty Council strongly endorses the implementation of statistically valid options on as fast a track as possible.”