Low Course Evaluation Response Rates: *Problems and Practical Guidelines*

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RESEARCH STUDIES

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Problems with Low Course Evaluation Response Rates

- Nonresponse bias (extreme opinions more likely to respond)
- Small samples create unstable averages
- A few students can disproportionately influence results
- Known biases (gender, race, course difficulty) become amplified
- Weak diagnostic feedback due to few comments
- Irresponsible personnel decisions (promotion, tenure, rank)

When do Low Response Rates Become an Issue?

- There is no universal cutoff, but common interpretations are:

- 60–70% response rate: Strong reliability
- 40–60% response rate: Moderate confidence
- Below 30%: Serious reliability concerns
- Below 20%: Highly unreliable

- Small classes require especially high participation because each individual students' responses represent a larger part of the total possible responses.

Suggested Minimum Responses by Class Size

Class Size	Responses Needed	Approx. Response Rate
12	11	92%
20	18	90%
30	25	83%
40	30	75%
75	46	61%
100	55	55%
125	60	48%

What Parameters do Other Campus Use?

- Minimum of 5–8 responses required before results are reported
- At least ~30 responses preferred for stable instructor comparisons
- 60%+ response rate recommended for personnel decisions like merit, promotions, etc.
- Small classes (under 30 students) often require 80–90% participation
- Results from very low-response surveys should be interpreted cautiously (whether positive or negative ratings)

Addendum: A Formula for Estimating Error

Approximate margin of error (95% confidence):
MOE ≈ 1 / √n (for proportions)
MOE ≈ 2 / √n (for Likert-scale averages)
Examples:
• 10 responses → ~±0.63 on a 1–5 scale
• 25 responses → ~±0.40
• 50 responses → ~±0.28
• 100 responses → ~±0.20
More responses dramatically improve statistical reliability.

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