



New Survey System Raises Response Rates and Lowers Costs for University

by Anne Sueko Coyle, eXplore

Client: The University of Louisville

Challenge: To ease the transition to Web-based response forms, the school needed a flexible survey system that could handle both paper and Web forms, was easy to use, and could seamlessly integrate with in-house systems

Solution: Blue, a flexible, user-friendly system designed for easy integration with current systems and rapid deployment

Benefits:

- ROI achieved in just over a year, with over 80% in cost savings in the third and following years
- Better response rates, with 78% of all surveys achieving 25% or higher response
- Seamless integration with current PeopleSoft, SAS, and GroupWise systems
- On-time, on-budget implementation, including development of a new feature for scanning paper forms

Founded in 1798, the University of Louisville (UofL) is a metropolitan university based in Louisville, Kentucky.

Its undergraduate, graduate, and professional development programs educate over 21,000 students every year from around the world.



Creating a culture of assessment

The school is known for its strong research focus. And it lives up to that reputation in more than one respect: the school's Office of Institutional Research and Planning conducts quality assessment within the institution, issuing over 60 surveys a year—and growing—among faculty, staff, students, employers, and alumni.

“We strive to maintain an assessment culture at the University of Louisville,” says Robert Goldstein, Assistant University Provost for Institutional Research, Assessment, and Data Management.

“We want to know how well we're meeting needs, where we can do better—it's part of our overall commitment to quality at the university.”

To perform this research, the school used to rely on a home-grown system custom developed and hosted by an outsourced provider.

Graduating to new requirement levels

But as the university grew and its research initiatives expanded, it became clear that the customized system could not handle its requirements. Plus, it was becoming cost-prohibitive.

“In higher education, we need to be very good stewards of our public funding,” says Robert. “It was clear to me we could find a more cost-effective system that we could bring in-house and have the flexibility we needed.”

After careful consideration, the UofL team narrowed its selection down to five vendors, each of which had an extensive list of features for survey management.



For the school's overall requirements, the Blue solution from eXplorance came out with the best report card.

“We had two primary requirements for our system: It had to integrate with our current systems, so we could include basic demographic information on survey forms without having to ask our respondents; and it had to manage both paper and Web-based forms, so we could provide that administrative option to our internal clients,” says Robert.

Blue passes with flying colors

Blue easily handled both requirements from the school. Blue was designed with a special layer that makes the integration process as easy as possible. For UofL, Blue was integrated with PeopleSoft, SAS, and GroupWise, its e-mail system.

The integration ensures e-mail messages are personalized and survey forms are shorter: Respondents aren't required to answer tedious questions such as race/ethnicity, gender, or age group.

“Once we’d worked through our system requirements, the integration process was straightforward. And eXplorance provided outstanding service—they really worked *with* us to help us find ways around any obstacle,” Robert says.

Blue’s OCR module provides scanning capability in addition to its core Web-based technology. This allows the school to offer either option to respondents: traditional pencil and paper forms or electronic Web-based forms.

All of this took place in remarkably short order: UofL signed in January and was up and running by mid-March.

Raising response rates with the right methods

The ability to provide either electronic or paper forms was critical to the school because of the effect on response rates.

“Several years ago, schools saw that electronic surveys were the most efficient method,” explains Robert. “But as more and more electronic media were used, we also saw response rates dropping.”

“I think an over-reliance on electronic communications was alienating an increasing percentage of our population. We needed to provide the academic units with different survey options. Having a mix of both makes this possible.”

Today, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning works with the various academic units to determine which medium is most likely to elicit higher response rates.

Consistently better than 25% response

What’s more, the Blue Web-based forms are garnering higher response than the electronic forms from the previous outsourced system.

“We have enjoyed a much improved response rate with Blue over other surveys we’ve administered online,” says Robert. Indeed, UofL has seen overall an impressive 78% of all surveys with a response rate of 25% or higher.

“Although it’s difficult to say for certain, we believe the shorter survey forms as



In keeping with its strong focus on research, the University of Louisville conducts surveys to assess the quality of the institution in the eyes of its faculty, staff, students, employers, and alumni.

well as the automatic, personalized, reminders have helped increase our response rates,” says Robert.

The integration also helps the school create powerful reports.

“It has really impressive reporting,” says Becky Patterson, Assistant Director for Institutional Research and Planning at the university.

“We can also export results into SAS, SPSS, or Excel for excellent reports that we send back to the academic units.”

Quick ROI and considerable cost savings

Greater response rates, greater efficiency, and greater control over its new system aren’t the only things UofL is happy about: It’s also looking forward to sizeable cost savings.

“We’re looking forward to substantive savings with the new system,” says Robert. “Our return on investment will take place after the first year, when we’ve paid for our one-time costs such as hardware and training. After that, we’re expecting to save over 80% year-by-year beginning at the third year, over our previous outsourced system—and we are really thrilled about that.”

Overall, the University of Louisville is giving Blue top marks.

“eXplorance has been a wonderful organization to work with, and I cannot speak more highly of them. They’re incredibly flexible, they provide excellent training and support, and they delivered on their promises on a very short time line,” Robert concludes.

“I’m impressed—and I’m not that easy to impress.”

