

Course Evaluations by Students Response Rates Spring 2012 - Spring 2018

Executive Summary

- The average response rates on Course Evaluations by Students (CEbS) have fallen from above 70% to 50% since we have transitioned from written to electronic forms.
- The distribution of response rates (see below) indicate that in fact most courses currently have less than a 50% response rate.
- As CEbS are used to evaluate teaching, low response rates are particularly problematic for lecturers and probationary tenure line faculty.
- Policies and practices need to be put in place to boost response rates.

CEbS at HSU: Spring 2012 - Spring 2018

Course Evaluations by Students (CEbS) provide feedback to faculty on student satisfaction. Though there is a robust literature on the shortcomings of CEbS, e.g. systematic bias against women¹ and people of color², little correlation between CEbS scores and student learning³, etc, CEbS are still widely used as a tool to *evaluate* teaching. Fortunately, at HSU CEbS are not the primary source of teaching evaluation (collegial evaluation is our primary tool), but they are used as supporting evidence in RTP decisions. Thus, having a fair representation of what the majority of students think of a particular course/instructor is critically important to the faculty of record. Unfortunately, the recent implementation of electronic student evaluations has led to a situations where only half of the students fill out their CEbS. With such a low response rate it is difficult to judge whether the numerical and written comments by those that do respond are representative of the whole class or are instead extreme opinions expressed by those that either loved or hated the instructor/course.

Prior to the spring 2013 semester, HSU used paper CEbS, which were filled out during class time while the instructor of record was out of the room. This process used a lot of paper and printing resources, required someone to proctor the CEbS - taking class time away from course content, and lacked consistency across colleges. The spring 2012 term was one of the last terms for which paper CEbS were used campus wide. As shown in the table below we see that the average response rate was 70%, with the mode at 100%⁴. It should be noted, that the

¹ L. MacNeill, A. Driscoll & A.N. Hunt, *Innov High Educ* (2015) 40: 291.

² P. B. Stark & R. Freishtat. *ScienceOpen Research* (2014).

³ B.Uttl, C.A. White & D..W. Gonzalez, *Studies in Ed Eval* (2017) 54: 22.

⁴ Average response rates are calculated by dividing the total number of responses from all evaluated courses by the enrollment of all evaluated courses.

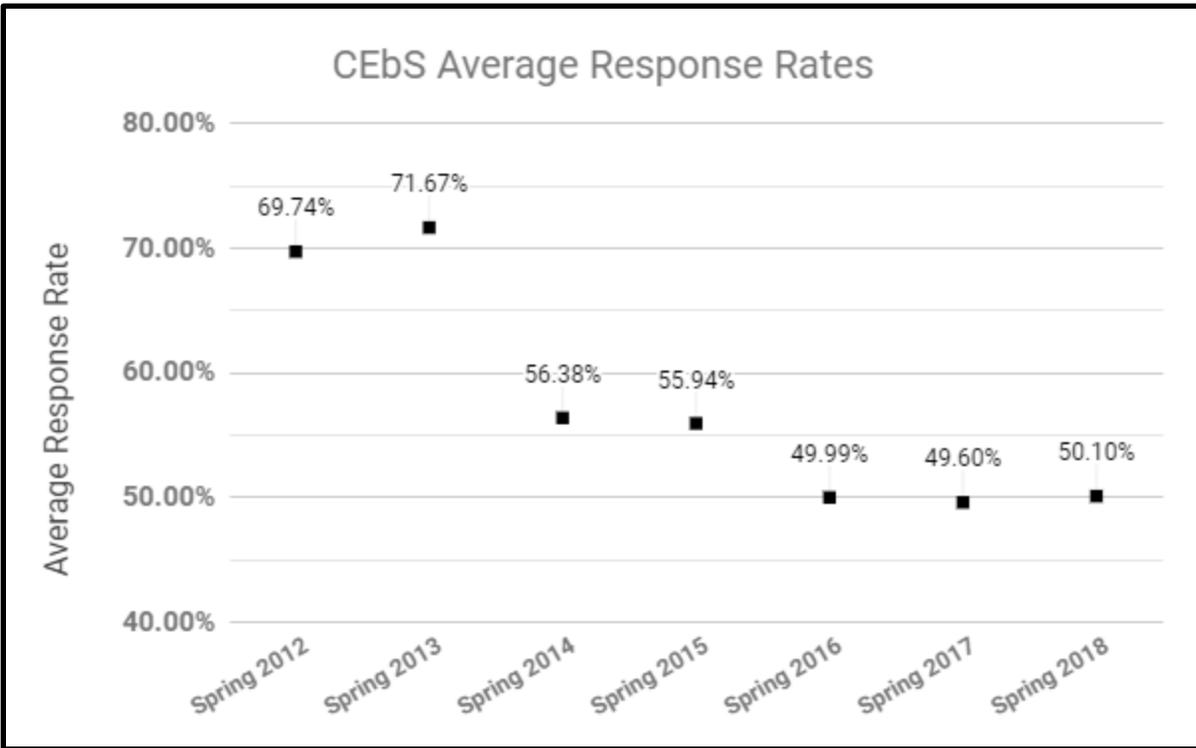
Spring 2012 data was odd. There were 183 courses where there were 0 responses. As it seems unlikely that zero students would respond when presented with a paper survey and then given time and instructions to fill out the survey, those courses were thrown out. Likewise, there were 16 courses with more respondents than there were students enrolled. Finally, though most courses that term did use paper evals, the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Science did use some electronic CEbS.

The spring 2013 term was the first for which electronic CEbS were used across campus. To encourage students to respond, many strategies were used, including: email reminders every 2 days, signage across campus, the creation of a CEbS website, an ad was run in the Lumberjack, etc. These efforts were successful, resulting in an average response rate 72%. It is worth noting that the mode had shifted down to 75%.

Feedback from students indicated that we were emailing them too often and that they did not need or appreciate the constant reminders to fill out their electronic CEbS. HSU responded by sending fewer email reminders and refrained from most other efforts to boost response rates. By the spring 2014 term, the average response rate had dropped to 56% with the mode at 50%. By the spring 2016 term, the average response rate had settled to its current value of 50%.

| Term | N (Number of Courses Evaluated) | Average Response Rate | Mode |
|---------------------|--|--------------------------|------|
| Spring 2012 (Paper) | 1,002 | 69.74% | 100% |
| Spring 2013 | 1,297 | 72.13% | 75% |
| Spring 2014 | 1,355 | 56.38% | 50% |
| Spring 2015 | 1,524 | 55.94% | 50% |
| Spring 2016 | 1,579 | 49.99% | 50% |
| Spring 2017 | 1,548 | 49.60% | 50% |
| Spring 2018 | 1,498 | 50.10% | 50% |

Number of courses evaluated, average response rates for those courses and mode for the Spring 2012 - Spring 2018 terms.



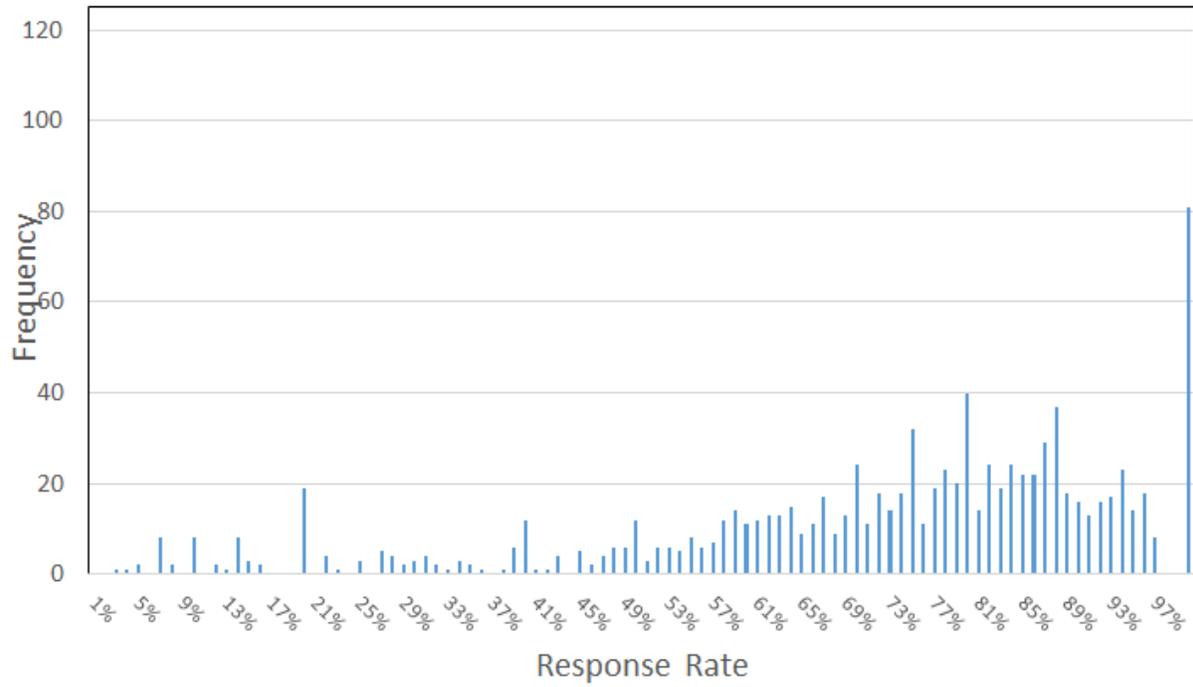
Plot of average response rate vs term, Spring 2012 - Spring 2018

When we look at the distribution of response rates we see a similarly troubling trend, more courses have lower response rates. The figures below are histograms, counting the number of courses that have a given response rate, thus each course is weighted the same whether they have 1 student or 100 students. This is why the average response rates above are not the same as the graphical average of the histograms.

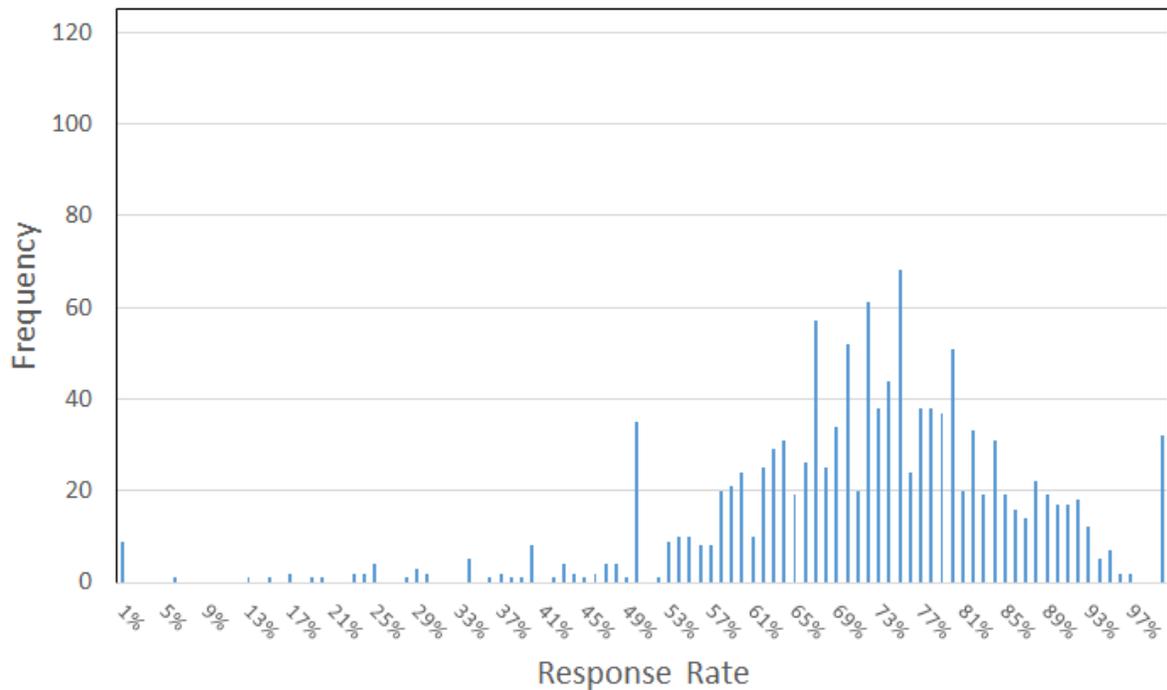
Clearly there has been a shift to lower response rates over the six year interval. Perhaps even more troubling is the well documented phenomenon that as fewer students respond, those that do more heavily represent those that have an extreme view of the course/instructor. Even in the initial trial year of electronic evaluations (with good response rates), we saw a decrease in the average values of Likert Scale items *and* an increase in the variance of those values.⁵ Since implementing electronic evaluations, we have had to include a check-box for students to acknowledge that they will not use vulgar or threatening language in their comments. In fact, the vitriol directed at certain instructors on our campus has resulted in several faculty members being allowed to return to paper evaluations as an attempt to control the troll-like behavior.

⁵ R. W. Bruce, *Spring 2013 Online Evaluations Pilot at Humboldt State University*, 2013.

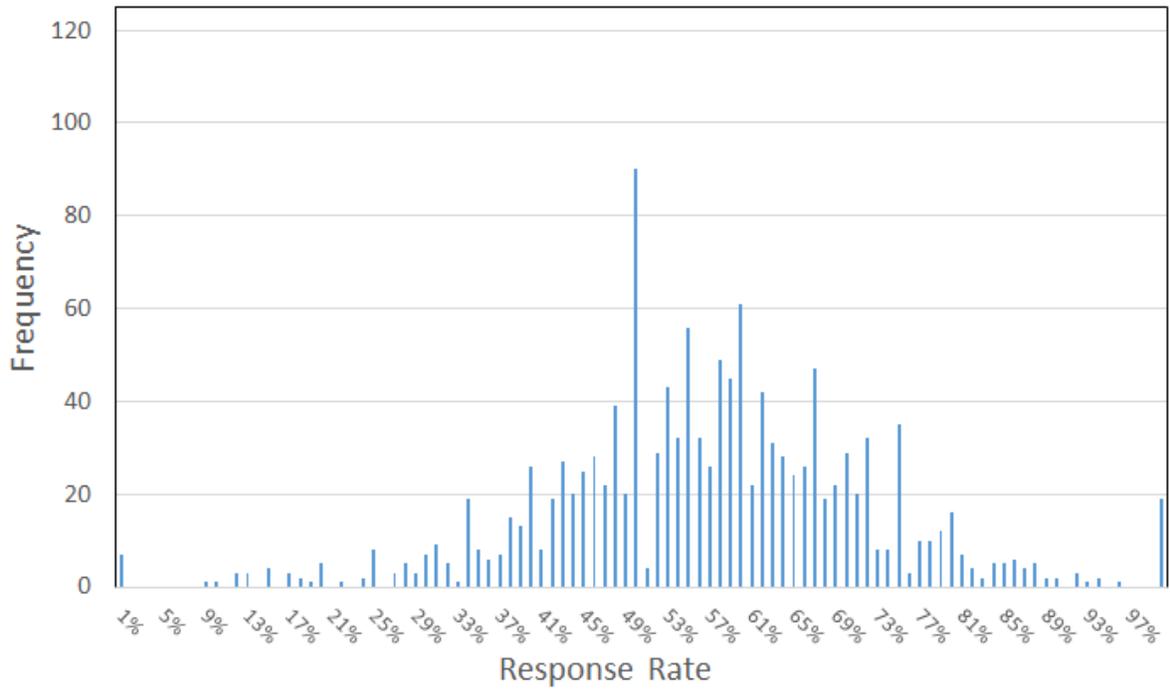
Spring 2012 Response Rate Distribution



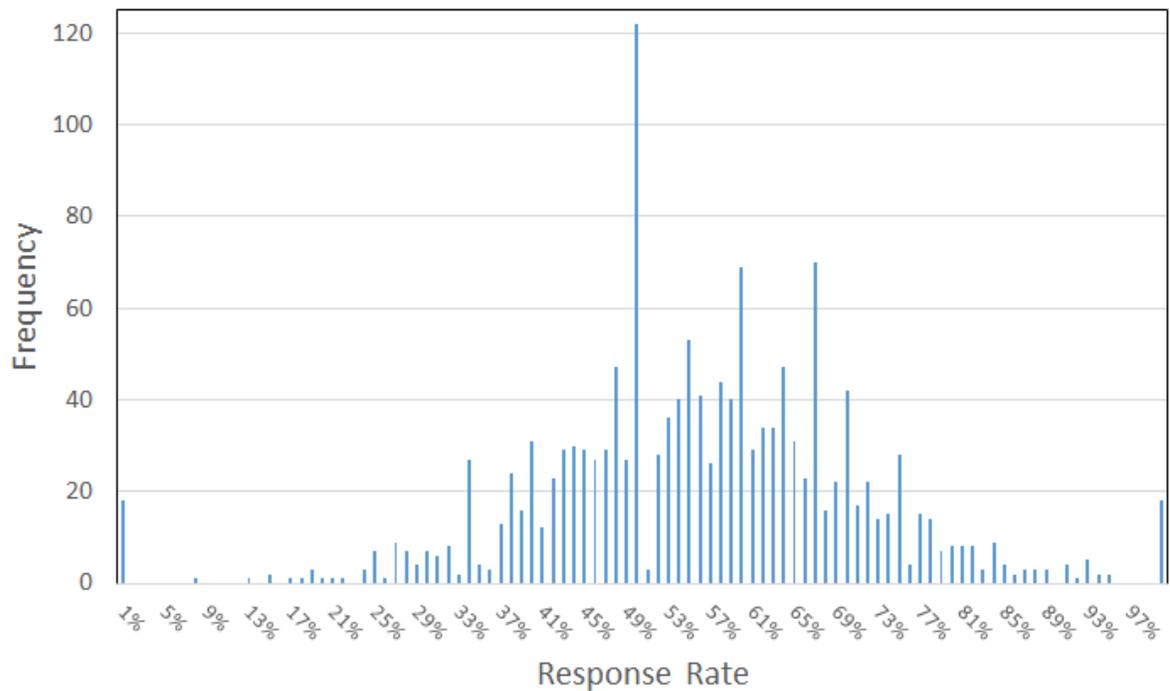
Spring 2013 Response Rate Distribution



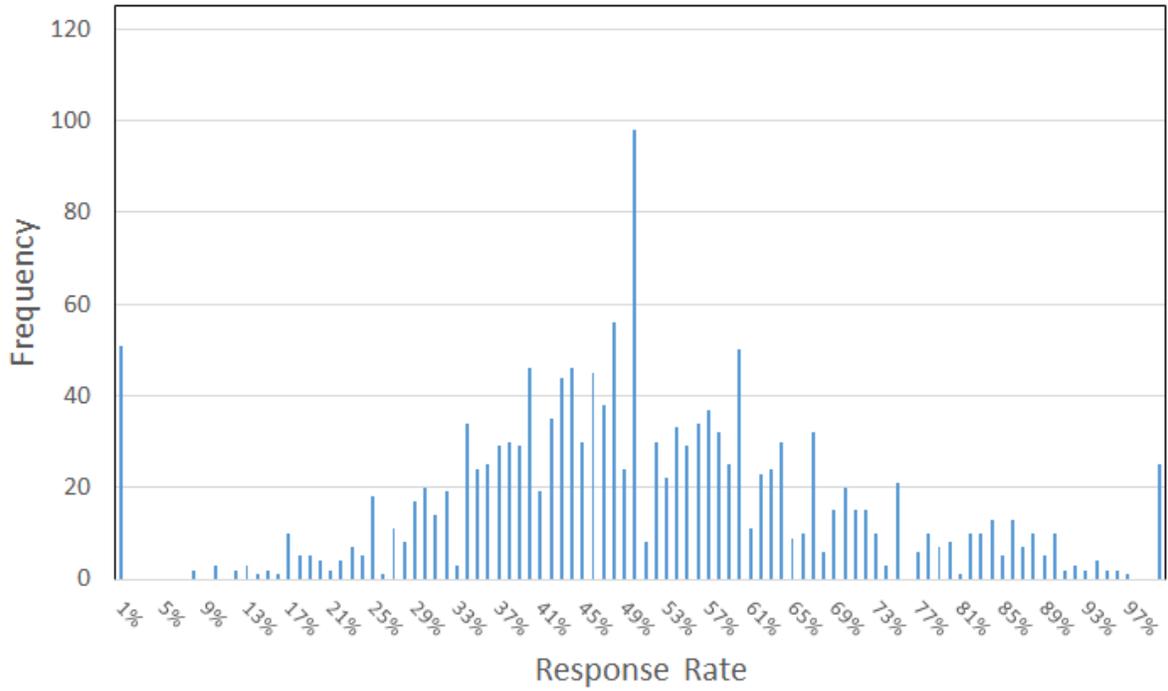
Spring 2014 Response Rate Distribution



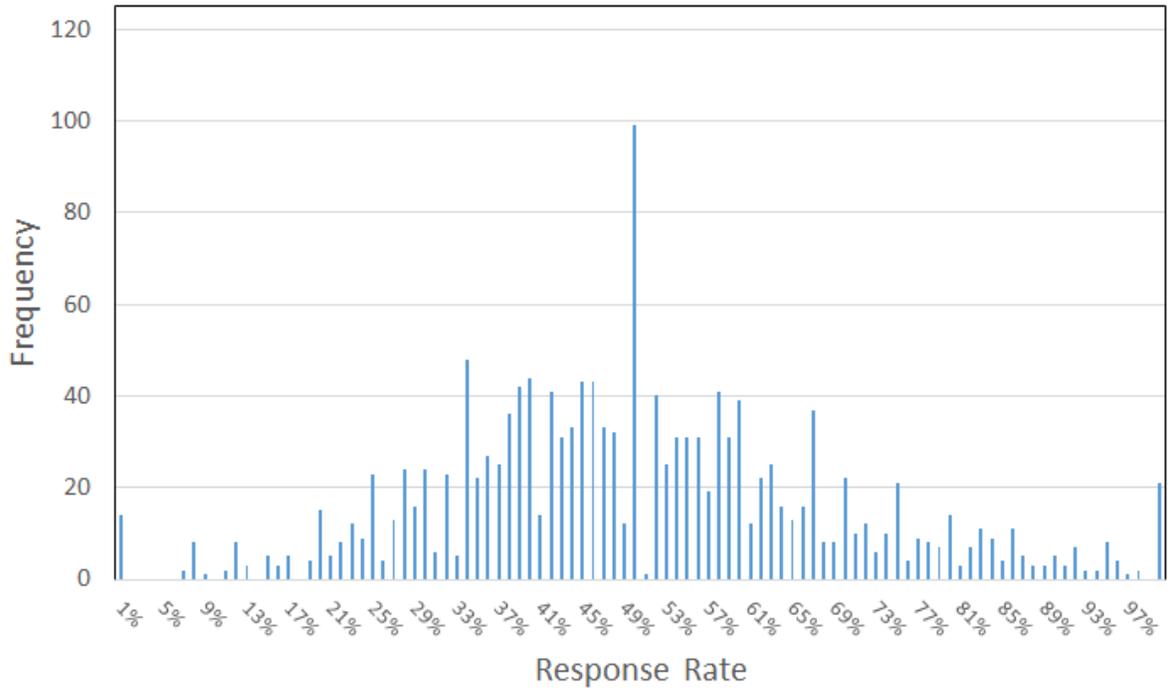
Spring 2015 Response Rate Distribution

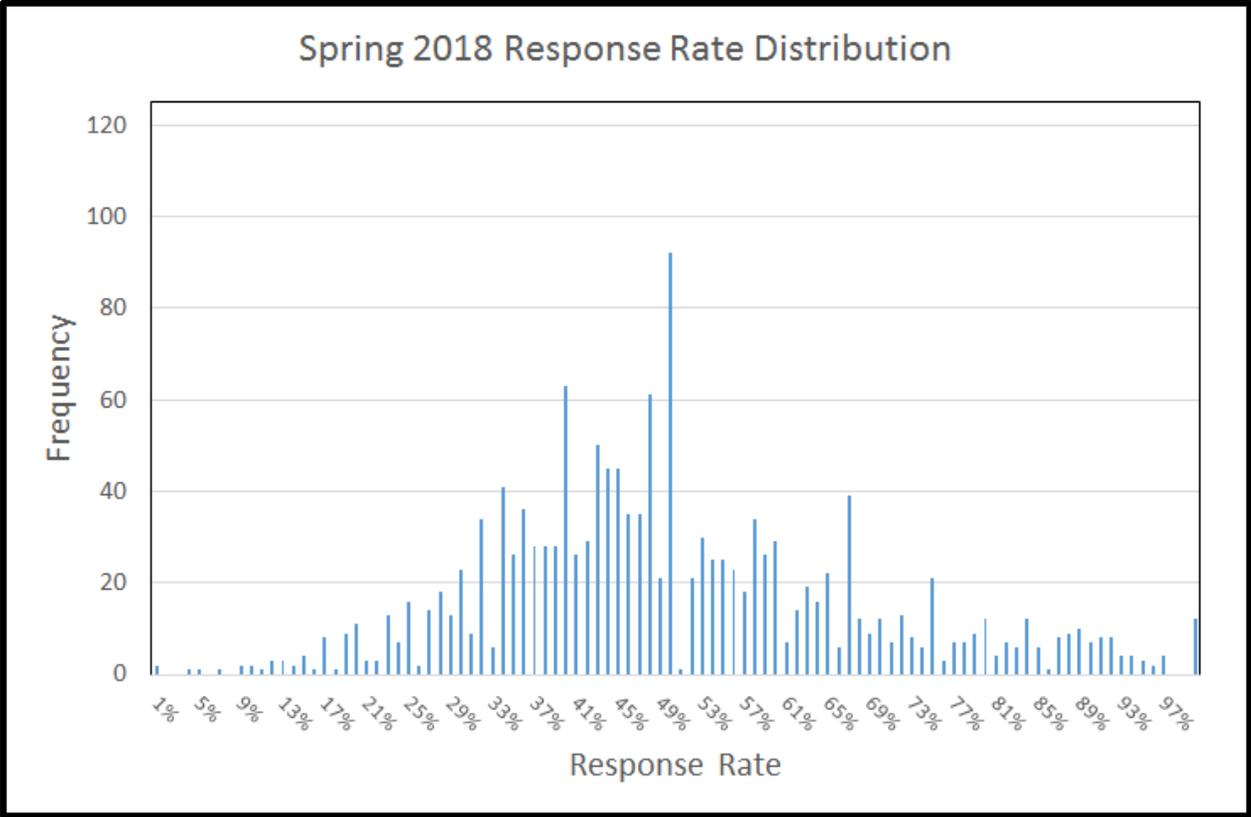


Spring 2016 Response Rate Distribution



Spring 2017 Response Rate Distribution





To date, the response rates on CEbS has fallen too low. We must implement strategies that boost the response rate. This work should not fall solely on the individual faculty member as the problem was not created by individual faculty. One strategy applied at one of our sister campuses is tying CEbS reminders to their LMS such that each time a student logs onto their LMS, they are reminded about of their remaining CEbS to be filled out. Another strategy is to tie grade release to completion of all of a student’s CEbS. HSU is currently looking at both of these ideas. HSU can certainly do a better job working with AS to figure out better advertising strategies. Our goal should be to boost the average campus response rate to 70% - 75%.