

Incentivizing Survey Participation: Best Practices and Recommendations

DePaul University

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Introduction

The use of incentives to increase survey participation is a common practice in higher education. Despite the range of prizes offered to potential participants, many institutions today find it difficult to attract a satisfactory sample size that can generate generalizable conclusions for the study. This report provides an overview of existing literature concerning the impact of incentives on survey participation, and provides contextualized recommendations for DePaul University on what incentives may be most cost-effective in increasing response rates for institutional surveys.

Background

DePaul University

DePaul University is a Vincentian, private urban university with an undergraduate enrollment of 15,961 (DePaul University Enrollment Management and Marketing, 2015). Out of this student body, 38% are students of color, 53% are female, and 47% are male. The Student Affairs division is comprised of 14 departments, many of which execute research studies and survey students for needs and program assessments.

Purpose of Implementing Incentives

The use of incentives for surveys is widespread in higher education, and its effectiveness and implementation are highly varied. They function to improve response rates for surveys and to demonstrate respect and appreciation for the participant's time and effort to complete the survey (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Survey incentives "work especially well for individuals who are not intrinsically motivated to complete the survey" (Wolff, 2016), and may be particularly helpful for larger institutions such as DePaul in which students may be less likely to feel that their contributions to a survey may not be as impactful for university-wide improvements.

A key component in gathering the interest of the potential participant is to engage their intrinsic motivation to complete the survey. Helping the student feel an individual interest in participating will ultimately gather responses from more individuals and garner accurate data as the participant will respond more thoughtfully (Deci et al., 1999). As such, the use of incentives can be understood as one pathway to generate students' intrinsic motivation, as it provides a gift of appreciation and cultivating a trusting relationship with the department or institution. However, when an institution focuses on the short-term benefits of controlling people's behavior and thus opts for a carelessly determined incentive, it can have long-term negative effects on the population studied; for future studies, there may be reduced participation rates or increased threats to validity due to decreasing intrinsic motivation. This generates questions about intrinsic motivation and how to cultivate students' trust of the institution, which will be addressed in following sections.

Despite the simplicity in ideal of this transactional relationship between participant and institution through the use of prizes, there exists significant conflicting research concerning the effectiveness of incentives in increasing participation rates. A wide range of studies have found that incentives significantly increase survey responses (Dykema, 2011; Porter & Whitcomb, 2003), have little statistical significance on response rates (Umbach, 2004; Church, 1993), and even decrease response rates (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Though this can be cause for alarm, it must be noted that there are a wide range of factors

that affect survey responses and participants' willingness to complete the survey. It is critical that survey administrators take into account the context of the study; the demographics, institution, and budget are all key components to consider when crafting an incentive proposal. The following section elaborates on the various factors that impact survey response rates and suggests a strategic planning process on implementing a campus survey.

Influential Factors for Survey Response Rates

Research emphasizes the importance of approaching surveys from a holistic perspective. The targeted participant, a student in a university setting, receives invitations to many surveys within the school year in a variety of formats, from emails, posters, and newspaper ads; implementing a strategic plan that values the institution's respect for the student is crucial to cultivating a long-term relationship with students to generate healthy response rates.

The University of Virginia's highly successful response rates for the 2011 National Survey of Student Engagement are worth mentioning in this report as a best practices example. In response to severely declining survey response rates which dropped from 75% in 2000 to 50% in 2010, the Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies (OIAS) shifted its perspective "from thinking about *response rates* to valuing student time and opinions" (University of Virginia Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies, p. 4). With a \$1,000 marketing budget, the office implemented an extensive marketing plan from early February to early March; steps included sending every Resident Assistant a poster prior to the NSSE's arrival, creating table tents at dining halls, and announcing the NSSE through a university press release. With a \$4,000 incentive budget, OIAS offered 100 prizes including \$20, \$50, and \$100 Amazon.com gift certificates and an iPad and iPod Touch. The thorough combination of marketing and incentivizing strategies that conveyed respect for students generated a 51% response rate. OIAS noted that faculty encouragement was highly influential; that electronic goods motivated reluctant students to participate; and that asking students for marketing ideas was helpful. The University of Virginia's success with the NSSE is used as a framework for a proposed strategic plan guide for DePaul University, illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Cycle of survey implementation.



Note. The figure demonstrates a cyclical strategy when implementing surveys to DePaul students. Based on University of Virginia's procedures for implementing the NSSE in 2011 (University of Virginia Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies, 2011).

Figure 1 illustrates the five stages in the cyclical strategy of survey implementation, which prioritizes the mutually respectful relationship between institution and student as demonstrated by the University of Virginia. Each stage is described below.

Trusting. It is important for the institution to continually build a mutually respectful relationship with students. Establishing a culture of trust can help students be more intrinsically motivated to take surveys, as they can become invested in the good of the university and understand that the study's results can help them as well. Some examples of strategies for building trust in the institution are:

- Make it explicitly known that you will safeguard students' anonymity in interviews and surveys, which demonstrates respect and care for the student (Cooperative Institutional Research Program, 2015).
- Explain to participants how the results will be used; emphasizing that the goal is to improve student experiences can help build a mutually trusting relationship. This can help address the concerns around students' decreasing intrinsic motivation to complete surveys, which can be mitigated by the institution's efforts to carefully reward students and thank them for their time.
- Contact students face-to-face when distributing the survey invitation; a study on low-income populations for survey efficacy found that participants were much more likely to participate when door-to-door recruitment was used, conveying that other

community members were participating in the study as well (Perez, Xie, Ardern, Radhu, & Ritvo, 2011).

Overall, following University of Virginia's model of collaborating with students on projects and demonstrating that student time is valued is recommended to influence campus culture.

Marketing. Carefully crafting a strategic advertising plan across various mediums – emails, newspaper ads, res hall posters, etc. – to announce the survey to targeted population helps students become familiar with the survey before and during its active phase. Good publicity plans include:

1. Sending a pre-notification email to students, letting them know that they'll soon receive an important survey
2. Customizing invitation emails (perhaps through Mail Merge?)
3. Advertising incentives, if any
4. Submitting an editorial or article on the school newspaper, student media, etc. about the survey and research project overall. This would help increase the transparency of the study, and help gain students' trust.
5. Sharing selected results during and after the survey administration on Facebook, Twitter, etc.
6. Setting up tables in student center with information about the survey, perhaps with iPads or tablets, if students want to sign up on the spot.
7. Partnering with student government and student organizations to share results with them
8. Reminding students frequently that results are confidential (Cooperative Institutional Research Program, 2015).

The ads should emphasize that the student voice is valued, and should include when the survey is available, how to access it, and how they can learn more about it overall.

Incentivizing. This is the discernment stage for determining what incentives, if any, the department will offer to participants, and how they will be distributed. The type of incentive will depend on a combination of target population, budget, and type of survey. The remainder of this report will focus on the recommended procedures for incentive determination. It is important to note that the incentive should be a part of the marketing process; particularly for valuable technology items like iPads, advertising the potential compensatory prizes for participation is useful to attract more students.

Surveying. After the survey and the incentive (if any) have been properly marketed to students, it is time to open access to the survey.

Reporting. When the survey period has ended and data analysis has begun, consider sharing the data and results with institution, students, and/or groups. Is there non-sensitive data about fraternity and sorority members that would be useful for the Greek council leadership to know, for example? For instance, Harvard University's Implicit Bias study shares the distributions of the general population's results after the participant completes the test, helping the participant understand where he or she stands within the broader United States population (Project Implicit, 2011). Including respondents helps gain

buy-in from them for future studies, and helps them feel more valued. In addition, sharing results can be beneficial to their work, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between students and the institution and ultimately feeding back into the cycle, beginning again with the Trusting stage.

This process provides a holistic view of the survey process, understanding the participant primarily as a student that the institution seeks to serve, not solely as an anonymous survey respondent. Overall, the goal is that the survey produces data that is beneficial to both student and university, a hope for DePaul Student Affairs. With this cycle in mind, the remainder of the report will focus on the types of survey incentives found in literature, and specified recommendations for DePaul University. It is important to note that this stage of “Incentivizing” should be embedded within the larger picture of cyclic survey implementation as displayed by the prior procedure.

Types of Incentives and Their Effectiveness

There are many incentive types to choose from, and based on the demographics of targeted students, various levels of cost-effectiveness in increasing response rates. According to a survey by of 374 public and private institutions conducted by Porter and Whitcomb (2003), 57.4% of institutions offered a school gift card, 22.1% offered cash, 14.8% offered clothing, and 5.7% offered electronics to incentive surveys. This section reviews the types of incentives commonly offered at institutions, methods of delivery, and perceived effectiveness of each type.

Cash/Gift Card Incentives

A common type of incentive used in higher education is cash and gift cards. A survey by University of California, Davis in 2006 found that students favored the following cash incentives in order from most favorable to least favorable:

1. 1/30 chance, \$10
2. 1/15 chance, \$5
3. 1/100 chance, \$35
4. 1/300 chance, \$100
5. 1/1000 chance, \$350
6. 1/1 chance, <\$1

It is noted, however, that these findings represent what students perceive to be the most favorable prize, and not necessarily a precise rendering of actually increased response rates.

According to a study performed by Porter and Whitcomb (2003), “increasing the size of the prize did not result in a linear increase in response rates” (p. 403). Populations offered incentives of \$50, \$100, and \$200 responded at higher rates than did those in the control group that were offered no incentives. Ultimately, the group offered a drawing to win a \$100 gift card merited the highest survey response rate, implying that it is the most effective amount for a gift card or prize.

It should be noted that Porter and Whitcomb (2003) offered a specified gift card to Amazon, as opposed to a generalized gift card applicable at any store. However, Sarraf and Cole (2014) found that institutions who utilized a general gift card incentive saw a 19%

increase in response rates compared to those who did not offer any incentive, whereas the specified gift card drew a 7% increase. As such, it is perceived that general gift cards are more effective than are specified gift cards.

Lottery Incentives

Offering a chance at receiving a valuable prize in return for participation is a common incentive. Common prizes include technology items such as iPads, iPods, and Kindle Fires, all useful items particularly for college students. Laguilles, Williams, and Saunders (2010) found that “the lottery incentive group had a significantly higher response rate than the control group” (p. 548), and suspected that participants may be motivated by the fun of testing chance or by the actual material good that they could possibly win. In addition, the researchers found that the lottery incentive attracts more female respondents than male respondents, and that the iPod prize attracted more males, and the dining services gift card attracted more females. In total, the lottery incentive led to a 5- to 9-point increase in survey response rates, proving its effectiveness in attracting participants.

Sarraf and Cole (2014) found that the general gift card or technology incentive improved response rates by 19% compared to the control group that was not offered an incentive; when offered a specific gift card, the increase was by 12%, implying a general gift card is more effective than a specified one. Additionally, each additional dollar amount on the gift cards increased the expected response rates by 8 to 9%.

Overall, research agrees that technology-related lottery incentives are most strongly related to increased response rates with general gift cards, cash, and specified gift cards following behind in order (Laguilles, Williams, & Saunders, 2010; Sarraf & Cole, 2014; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014). Thus, if the budget allows for it, funds should be used to offer items like iPads and Kindles rather than dining gift cards and cash.

Other Incentives to Consider

A recently used type of incentive is a donation to charity (University of Wisconsin Survey Center, 2011). In exchange for a student’s participation, the administrators may promise a donation to a charity of their choice; this may help increase the student’s intrinsic motivation for participating in the survey, as it helps them feel charitable. Some examples of administering this incentive are:

- A \$5 donation to one of several selected charity organizations in return for the student’s participation.
- A \$1-for-1 response competition, in which the institution promises to donate the equivalent dollar amount for each response it receives in the survey.
- A promised donation of \$500 to an organization upon receiving 5000 responses.

Though there is no literature discussing the effectiveness of this incentive in comparison to others, it may contribute to students trusting the survey administrators for their benevolence, contributing to the “Trusting” component of the survey implementation cycle.

Coupons are another option to incentivize survey participation. However, as their monetary value is minimal, consider using a small gift card instead or a cash prize. Literature conveyed some effectiveness when offering a \$5 cash reward for participation (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003), an effect that may be transferable to coupons.

Recommendations for DePaul University

Given the overview of literature, it is important to keep in mind the targeted student population and the provided marketing and incentive budgets for the survey. In synthesizing the research, the following is a simplified list of incentives, in order of cost-effectiveness in increasing survey response rates:

Figure 2. Recommended incentives for surveys, in decreasing order of efficacy

Incentive type	Recommended odds of winning
Lottery for a technology-related item such as an iPad, iPod Touch, or Kindle	Depending on budget; consider offering a chance at 1 or 2 available items for participation
Lottery for a \$100 cash prize or general gift card	Depending on budget; consider offering a chance at 5 to 10 prizes
Lottery for a \$100 specified gift card	Depending on budget; consider offering a chance at 5 to 10 prizes
Guaranteed coupon or small cash prize (under \$5)	Guaranteed
Lottery for an item, such as DePaul-branded clothing	As high as possible; 1/10 or greater
Donation to charity of participant's choice	Guaranteed

The recommendations presented above are to be considered individually; as there is no literature exploring how combinations of incentives influence response rates, the order from most to least preferable is for administering one type of incentive per study. A combination may be effective in increasing participation rates, but it remains to be empirically tested by researchers.

Consider how large your budget is, and whether to increase or decrease odds of winning if you are implementing a lottery system. To calculate required budgets and see suggested prizes for each category, refer to "Required Budgets Based on Odds of Winning and Cost of Prize" Excel Sheet.

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