Timing is Everything: What we can learn from “survey procrastinators”

Presented by:

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Tufts, like many institutions, relies heavily on online survey platforms to collect data.

Online survey platforms have many advantages over paper-and-pencil surveys.
- Inexpensive
- Easy to use
- Improved distribution
Web-Based Surveys

- A major advantage: busy respondents can complete surveys at their convenience.
  - More time = better data?

- Low response rates compromise data quality.
  - Not a representative sample
Why Don’t They Participate?

- Online non-response might be because...
  - Unread email routed to spam folder
  - Student temporarily too busy (e.g. exams)
  - Student forgot
  - Student doesn’t want to participate
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- These students benefit from reminders.
We send reminders to intervene in passive nonresponding...
...and maybe a little active nonresponding, too.

We assume people who complete a survey after the reminder are similar to those who completed it before the reminder.

Is that a valid assumption?
We know that people who do not respond to surveys differ from those who do in several key ways.

- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- GPA

This is known as “nonresponse error,” and can lead to erroneous conclusions.
Could late responders – or “procrastinators” be different, too?

Past research on this topic has found differences...
- But most is based on mail surveys...
- ...and findings are mixed.

Some evidence that late responders display more problem behavior.
Who, exactly, are survey procrastinators?
   How much time must pass in order for someone to be considered a “late” responder?

Two definitions initially considered
   
   - Late = responding 12+ hours after an invitation or reminder issued
   - Late = responding after a reminder issued

Responding = starting a survey
A large percentage of survey participants do so in the first 12 hours after receiving a survey invitation.
- Students are constantly connected.

But...
- Students have competing responsibilities
  - Can’t do survey right away
- Students are forgetful
Reminders generate surveys, too.

Reminders necessary because...
- Students are busy
- Students are forgetful
- Email is discarded or in spam folder

Did not want to participate... but will now
Late = Respond 12+ hours after a survey invite/reminder is sent.

Late = Respond only after the reminder is sent.
Research Questions

- Are procrastinators different from “regular” responders?
- How does the survey incentive impact procrastination (and the procrastinators)?
- Is there a “better” definition of procrastination?
Research Method

- Analyzed data from two undergraduate surveys at Tufts

- Tufts University...
  - Private Research University – Very high activity
  - Entering class size ~1300
  - Competitive admissions
  - 4-year Liberal Arts & Engineering undergraduate schools
The Surveys

- Sophomore Survey
  - Administered sophomore spring

2012 Survey:
- Highly incentivized – high response rate (93.3%)
- Initial email & 2 reminders
- Advising, majors, student life, services, civic engagement

2013 Survey
- Low incentive – lower response rate (64.0%)
- Initial email & 6 reminders
- Added “flourishing scale”, removed advising questions
The Students

- **2012**: 1073 Liberal Arts sophomores
  - 54.5% female
    - Not different from population
  - GPA not significantly different

- **2013**: 718 Liberal Arts sophomores
  - 61% female
    - Different from population
  - Mean GPA higher than nonresponders
Started within 12 hours of an email: 59.1%
Started before a reminder issued: 58.7%
Both groups, procrastinators:
- Are typically male
- Reported more difficulty choosing a major
- Less likely to make an appointment to see academic advisor...
  - ...and more likely to drop in at the last minute.
  - ...and more likely to feel the time spent with their advisor was inadequate.
Results 2012 (High Incentive)

- Both groups, procrastinators:
  - Less likely to participate in student organizations and community service
  - Less likely to know their professors outside of class...
    - ...and to feel comfortable asking them for help (e.g. rec letters, academic advising)
Procrastinators = after 12 hours:

- Less likely to indicate study abroad plans
- Less likely to believe alcohol on campus is a problem
Results 2012 (High Incentive)

Procrastinators = after reminder issued:

- Less likely to choose Tufts again
- Took less time to complete survey
  - Proxy of how engaged they were?
  - Open-ended questions
Results 2013 (Low Incentive)

- Started within 12 hours of an email: 88.2%
  - Keep in mind, there were 7 emails total!
  - Not useful...

- Started before first reminder issued: 48.7%
  - Six reminders to get the other 51.3%...

- Started before second reminder issued: 67%
Procrastinators = after 1 or 2 reminders
- Less time to complete survey
- More difficulty choosing a major
- Less likely to know their professors outside of class...
  - ...and to feel comfortable asking them for help (e.g. rec letters, academic advising)
Procrastinators = after 1 or 2 reminders

- Less likely to participate in student organizations and community service
- Less satisfied with sense of community on campus
- Feel less able to contribute to the campus community

- No differences in flourishing scale
No differences:
- Likelihood of choosing Tufts again
- GPA
- % Female

Procrastinators different from nonresponders.
Procrastinators were different from non-procrastinators
- More academically adrift
- Less engaged on campus
- More dissatisfied

Procrastinators different from nonresponders?

Those who waited for a reminder spent less time on the survey
Take Home Points

- Reminders are good! Send them.

- Dissatisfied and less engaged students procrastinate – wait for them!

- Plan your survey administration carefully.
  - Incentives?
  - When to send reminders? How many?
Limitations

- We don’t really know why people procrastinate
- Homogenous sample
  - Did not analyze based on ethnicity
- Many other variables of interest
  - Qualitative data
  - Majors
  - Prematriculation data
That’s all, folks...

Question Time!
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