

We're Listening: Improving Survey Processes Based on Student Feedback

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Background: Tufts OIRE

- Tufts University
 - Private, 4-year, research university
 - Undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools
 - Approximately 10,800 students
- Tufts' Office of Institutional Research & Evaluation (OIRE)
 - Eight primary staff members: Director, two Associate Directors, three Research Analysts, a Business Analyst, and a Coordinator
 - Provides data, topical research, and analytical support to University decision makers within every school and division
 - Much of our work involves survey research – especially with students

Presentation Overview

- Literature
- Project Rationale
- Research Questions
- Methods
- Findings
- Lessons Learned & DIY
- Discussion

Literature

- Student surveys are a valuable resource for information within higher education.
- Survey data is used in many ways...
 - Institutional planning
 - Assessing student learning outcomes
 - Meeting external reporting requirements (Gonyea, 2005; Porter, 2004b)
- Increased institutional accountability has led to an increased demand for data (Alexander, 2000; Immerwahr & Johnson, 2010)
- Surveys are the most inexpensive way to obtain data.

Literature

- But... survey response rates have decreased over time (e.g. Atrostic, Bates, Bury, & Silberstein, 2001; Curtin et al., 2005; Jans & Roman, 2007; Krosnick, 1999)
- Low response rates are problematic when nonresponders are dissimilar to responders in important ways (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000; Dalecki, Whitehead, & Blomquist, 1993)
- When responders and nonresponders are significantly different, we risk drawing erroneous conclusions. This is known as nonresponse bias.
- Boosting response rates in service of improving sample representativeness – and therefore avoiding nonresponse bias – is imperative.

Literature

- Previous research has identified some ways to improve response rates...
 - Incentive structure (e.g., Martin & Loes, 2010)
 - Survey length (Adams & Gale, 1982)
 - Survey modality (Kaplowitz et al., 2004; Kwak & Radler, 2002; McCabe et al., 2006)
- But... which specific approaches are most effective may vary by institution...

...and can even vary within an institution over time.

Rationale

- Survey techniques that boost response rates at other institutions may not work at Tufts (and vice versa)
- Techniques that used to work at Tufts might not work now!
- Techniques that work at the beginning of the semester might not work at the end of the semester

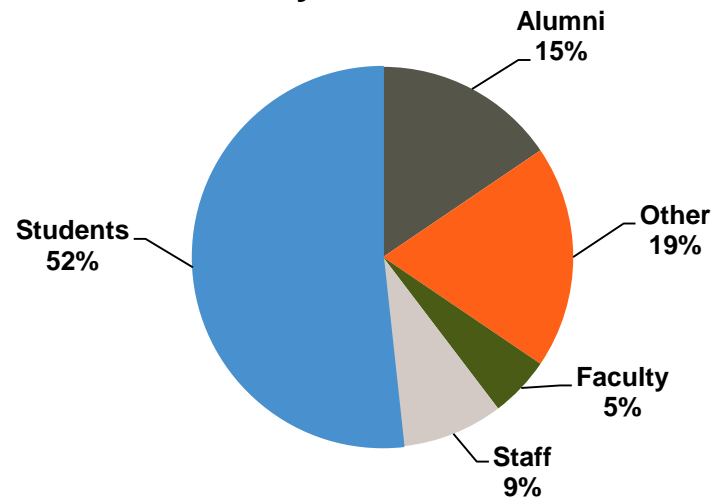
Rationale

- Voluntary surveys at Tufts have low response rates
 - Response rates vary (14.3% - 64.0%, median = 40%)
 - Overburdened with surveys?
- Clients ask us, “What do students like?”
 - Incentives
 - Limited data to support any suggestions we make
- It is the mission of OIR&E to support decision-making with appropriate data
 - A survey of students seemed to be the wrong approach!

Surveys at Tufts

- OIR&E sent approximately 60 surveys in the 2012-2013 academic year
 - Over half to students

**Tufts OIRE Surveys 2012-2013
by Audience**



Research Questions

1. What do students think about the surveys they have been asked to take? What do they think about the data being collected?
2. Why do some – but not all -- students participate in surveys? What deters nonrespondents from participation?
3. How can we motivate students to participate in a survey?

Methodology: Overview

- Recruitment:
 - Email invitation
 - Random sample of sophomores, juniors, and seniors – 1/3 of each class
- Focus groups
 - 60 minutes long
 - Offered at varying times throughout the week
 - Refreshments provided
- Focus groups recorded and content analyzed for common themes

Methodology: Focus Group Topics

- Topics discussed in each group included:
 - Reactions upon receipt of emailed survey invite
 - Conditions for optimal survey participation:
 - Time of day, day of the week
 - Description of survey in email
 - Tangible and intangible incentives
 - What happens to data after submitting a survey
 - Survey design and aesthetics

Methodology: Participants

- 5 focus groups with a total of 33 Tufts undergraduates
 - 52% Seniors, 30% Juniors, 18% Sophomores
 - Ethnically/racially diverse
 - Recipients of multiple survey invitations in AY 2012-13
- Survey engagement in AY 2012-13
 - The percentage of surveys taken out of all voluntary survey invitations received
 - Does not include “mandatory” surveys
 - Range: 0% to 100%, median 68%

Participant Demographics

| | | |
|--|----------------------------|--------------|
| Class Year | Sophomore | 18.2% |
| | Junior | 30.3% |
| | Senior | 51.5% |
| Area of Study | Social Science | 33.3% |
| | Natural Science | 21.2% |
| | Engineering | 15.2% |
| | Arts & Humanities | 12.1% |
| | Undecided | 12.1% |
| Gender | Male | 60.6% |
| | Female | 39.4% |
| Race/Ethnicity | White | 45.5% |
| | Students of Color | 27.3% |
| | Non-resident Alien | 15.2% |
| | Race/Ethnicity unknown | 12.1% |
| Percent of non-mandatory surveys taken in 2012-13 | 0% Surveys Taken | 9.1% |
| | 0% < Surveys Taken <= 50% | 27.3% |
| | 50% < Surveys Taken < 100% | 21.2% |
| | 100% Surveys Taken | 42.4% |

Findings: Four primary themes

1. Desire for closure to survey participation
2. Survey participation as a form of “productive procrastination”
3. Desire to feel “chosen”
4. Everyone wants an incentive

Disclaimer!

- Some students will only do surveys that are personally interesting to them.
 - Extracurricular activities, “hot topics” on campus, their majors, food...
- Not all our surveys can be “interesting”!

Survey Closure

- Students universally reported a desire for closure to their participation
 - Validation that their participation was worth their time
 - Confirmation that raffle prizes are real and have winners

Survey Closure: Validation

- Desire for data
 - They don't want to “do surveys for the sake of doing surveys”
 - They want to know how their input changed Tufts
 - They want to see results!

Survey Closure: Validation

It would be really great after you've completed a survey if you could get a report about the general results. It feels very isolating if that's the last you hear about it.

I do surveys because I can see why it's important. Maybe if people saw what happens with these more, if they could see the results, it would make you more likely to answer surveys in the future. It's interesting stuff, you're curious about what other people think.

Survey Closure: Validation

- Students are motivated to do surveys when they know that their participation can drive change
 - ...especially when this change could happen during their time at Tufts.
 - Dining Hall's popular "New Food Week"
- If they do not see or hear of change, students assume their surveys are "sitting on the back burner".
 - This de-incentivizes them to participate in future surveys

Survey Closure: Confirmation

- Desire to know raffle winners
 - Serves as proof that the raffle prize was real
 - Some prizes seem “far fetched”
 - They want to know if they did not win
 - ...especially when prize is of a high value.

Survey Closure

- Next steps:
 - Encourage clients to share data following a survey
 - OIR&E does not own its survey data
 - Encourage clients to release names of raffle winners (with permission of the winners) on social media, website
 - Include a mechanism in the survey that allows students to opt in to receiving updates or results via email

Productive Procrastination

“When you receive a survey invitation in your email, what do you typically do?”

- Typical process:
 - Skim email content on mobile device
 - What is this survey about?
 - How long will it take?
 - What is the incentive?

Productive Procrastination

- After skimming email:
 - Try to do the survey on mobile device
 - Flag email for later reading
 - ...but, sometimes they delete the email or forget to return to it
- Do survey when in need of a distraction
 - Evening before starting homework
 - In between classes (or sometimes in classes...)

Productive Procrastination

- Students described survey participation as a way of procrastinating... but in a guilt-free way!
- Because they are helping the university, the diversion is permissible
- Most students start their coursework after dinner, and are looking for a distraction in the early evening.
 - ...But, procrastination makes them feel guilty on Sundays – this is when they are catching up on all the work due on Monday.

Productive Procrastination

By the end of the day, this survey is... a tool of procrastination. That means I can put off the things I really need to do. Knowing that it also helps the University in some function is a nice additional motivator to say "I'll do this instead."

If you make it seem like they're contributing to Tufts, they might be more likely to say, I'll do this, it's more worthwhile than playing Candy Crush.

Productive Procrastination

- Next steps:
 - Capitalize on the post-dinner time period when students are actively looking for a distraction
 - ...but not on Sundays!
 - Avoid sending surveys in the morning or during the day, when they are likely to be overlooked, deleted, or forgotten.
 - Emphasize that student input does support change

The chosen ones...

- Students want to feel special
 - They want to feel selected, chosen, picked to participate in a survey... even if they know they're not.

I came [to this focus group] because of the email. I was like, "This sounds like they didn't send this out to everyone!" It seems like YOU'VE been chosen, you're special. It makes you feel important.

I like things that make me feel important. It said "Need your help!" I'm like, really? You need my help?

The chosen ones...

- They take notice when a survey invitation addresses them directly

When someone personalizes the email in a way that I feel like I'm really needed, or I've been selected for something...it's the same feeling as getting a gift card.

- And they want to be acknowledged as people

I don't like to be considered "data" – I don't want to feel like I'm going straight into Excel or being "coded" or "compiled", or that we're data points instead of people.

The chosen ones...

- And, they want opportunities to express their opinion in ways that may not conform with most surveys
 - Participants cited the uniqueness of a focus group as a motivator to sign up

It wasn't just that I was chosen – it was that I was chosen to have a dialogue about the institution... something you don't really get a chance to talk about.

The chosen ones...

- Next steps:
 - When using a survey panel or randomly selecting students, use language emphasizing that they are “chosen”
 - Using Qualtrics, pipe student names into the emailed greeting to “personalize” the invitation
 - Avoid language that would lead a student to believe that they are being reduced to numbers
 - When possible, encourage clients to consider alternative forms of data collection, such as focus groups

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- Past research: students are more likely to respond to surveys that offer a guaranteed incentive (Sharkness, 2012).
 - Guaranteeing an incentive can be expensive – is this the right approach for Tufts?
 - If a client could guarantee an incentive – what should it be?
- If a client opts to raffle a prize – what would be an effective prize?

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- Students sometimes – but not always – participate in surveys for the incentive.

I do surveys out of the goodness of my own heart... but if they're giving out free tickets to see Kanye West, I would do anything to see him live...

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- Students like the idea of a guaranteed incentive
 - Small gift cards for coffee shops, Amazon, JumboCash
 - Vouchers for food, especially at off-campus locations
 - ...and especially for students who live off-campus

This summer I did a survey on the street because I got a \$5 Dunkin' Donuts gift card. I don't even go to Dunkin' Donuts! But I still did it.

I did a series of 4 surveys and got a coupon to Brown and Brew (coffee shop) each time because I was like, "Yay! Free drinks!" But I never turned in any of those coupons...

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- But, the incentive must be proportional to the survey...
and for the retail location

If the survey was going to take an hour, and all I was going to get was a cup of coffee? I probably wouldn't do it.

If the incentive doesn't make sense to me, it decreases the value of it... I can't get anything at Target for \$5.

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- Raffle prizes
 - Students want a more realistic chance of winning a raffle prize.
 - Multiple smaller raffle prizes were preferable to one single large raffle prize.

I did a survey and I won \$25 to Barnes and Noble. They said 20 people would win, and that really prompted me to do it because I had a higher chance of winning something small compared to one person winning an iPad or something.

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- Be creative!
- Dinner with the University President, popular faculty, or well-known staff

I would take any survey for a dinner with the President.

The President? A one-on-one dinner? I would do that survey no matter how long it was.

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- “Tuftsy” or Boston-related incentives
 - Opportunity to meet a campus speaker or entertainer
 - Tickets to campus events before they go on sale to the general public
 - Tickets to local museums, movie theaters, or restaurant gift cards
 - Tufts memorabilia (e.g., sweatshirts)
 - Extra points in the housing lottery
 - Free meals at the dining hall for upperclassmen

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- Raffle prizes
 - Students dislike raffles that offer one large prize

The chances of me getting that...it's not equated to what my time is worth.

I always wonder where the money is coming from when they are raffling off large prizes... is it my tuition?

- Large raffles were only motivating if they were extra-special...

*It would have to be pretty significant... like *good* Patriots or Red Sox tickets. Not the bleachers, or with a pole in the way. Or courtside Celtics tickets...*

Survey Strategies: Incentives

- Next steps:
 - When possible and appropriate, offer a guaranteed incentive
 - When vouchers are involved, some students won't ever use them!
 - If that isn't possible, several smaller raffle prizes are desirable
 - Large raffle prizes should be carefully considered

Lessons learned

- Value of talking to students
- Students are invested in changing Tufts – use this to our advantage!
- Students want to know what is going on – they want to see the data

Lessons learned

- Students want to be made to feel special...
 - ...how they are invited...
 - ...how they are rewarded...

 - ...so we need to be mindful of this.
- Students fit surveys into their busy schedules
 - ...we need to be respectful of this
 - ...we need to adapt surveys for mobile devices when possible

DIY

- Initial preparation
 - Received IRB approval
 - Scheduled five focus groups on different days and at different times
 - Reserved centrally located rooms on campus to hold focus groups
- Focus Group Invitation
 - Emailed a random sample of sophomores, juniors, and seniors the week before the focus groups were scheduled
 - Followed up with one reminder email
 - Emailed a second random sample the week of the focus groups to fill remaining seats

DIY

- Week of the Focus Groups
 - Emailed consent form to all focus group participants
 - Sent reminder emails to all participants on the day of their focus group
 - Purchased refreshments for each focus group
 - Two analysts attended each focus group and all sessions were recorded
- Analysis
 - Closely listened to recordings of focus groups to extract common themes
 - Devised a set of action items based on feedback from focus groups

Discussion

- Questions, Comments?
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- A copy of this presentation will be uploaded to our website (and to NEAIR's)

<http://provost.tufts.edu/institutionalresearch/>

