Best Practices in Raising SERU Response Rates

SERU Consortium[1]
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Declining response rates is a problem that is a source of concern for all who conduct campus surveys. We can identify a number of reasons for this decline, including the proliferation of surveys and resulting survey fatigue, students' patterns of interacting with social media in short bursts, and perhaps also suspicions about the uses of data by campus officials. In past years, response rates to SERU/UCUES were invariably at 30% or higher. Over the last two years we have seen response rates lower than 15% on several campuses.

These declines threaten important objectives of SERU/UCUES, notably adequate representation of all groups on campus and the accuracy of inferences drawn from responses.

Although we cannot reverse some of the changes that have led to declining response rates in campus surveys, there are steps that every campus can take to minimize the decline in response rates to the SERU/UCUES survey and to shift response rates back in the direction of the expectation that 30% or more of students will respond.

These steps fall naturally into three categories of action: (1) actions taken prior to the launch of the survey (2) actions taken during the survey period, and (3) actions following the survey. Our discussion draws on the experience of several campuses that have maintained high response rates, including the UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, and Rutgers University.

A. Actions Prior to Launch

(1) *Map out all of the Outlets and Key People and Hold Meetings with Strategic Communications.* Make a diagram or list of all the outlets and people involved in conducting a successful survey. These will include print media, social media, advertising on campus, in-person events, and possibly other media, such as advertising on buses and donation campaigns to improve or broaden incentives. Meet with campus units and individuals who have expertise in these areas and who are willing to partner on the project. Create a list of "go-to" individuals. UC Davis recommends meeting, in particular, with key personnel in Strategic Communications (or an analogous unit) to plan a broad social media and advertising plan for the survey.

(2) *Prioritize the SERU/UCUES Survey in the Minds of Administrators and Chairs.* Senior administrators, deans, and chairs should all know that the SERU/UCUES Survey is the most important undergraduate survey of the year. Because university administrators change from year to year, it is important to speak about the survey at leadership and chairs meetings and to show some of the institutional policy changes and important research that has come out of past administrations. If at all possible, make sure that no other major surveys are in the field during the period of the SERU/UCUES survey.

(3) *Departmental Competition is often Very Effective.* Some campus IR reps have achieved high response rates work closely with departments. They ask department chairs to send out emails to majors. They post response rates frequently for department chairs. (This tends to bring out competitive motivations, which can lead to higher response rates.) They indicate that unless departments reach a given proportion of majors completing the survey, they will not be able to share benchmark data with the department. This strategy has worked very effectively in the past at UC Berkeley and is currently a primary strategy at the University of Virginia.

(4) *Determine who the best Authors for Survey Invitations Will Be and Submit Content to them Early.* As early as possible, determine which campus leaders would make good "authors" for survey invitations to students. Submit content to them weeks in advance to secure their approval in time for survey launch. Follow up as needed. Popular administrators, as

well as all deans and department chairs should all be ready to help with response rate by writing students in their colleges or majors about the importance of the survey and following up with letters aimed to increase response rates.

(5) ***Carefully Plan the Invitation Schedule.*** At UC Berkeley, 18 messages are sent over 90 days with a hiatus during finals. Prize deadlines are highlighted. The content of email reminders is changed frequently with regard to subject lines, signatories, and the body of the message.

(6) ***Think Hard about How to Reach Groups with Low Response Rates.*** At UC, male students, African American students, and international students have lower than average response rates. Particular attention should be given to how best to reach these students.

(7) ***Publicize the Survey on the Student Portal and through as Many Other Means as Possible****.* Many campuses add a graphical banner about the survey on the student portal as well as other campus sites that students use frequently (e.g., the Career Center, Student Affairs, Undergraduate Education). UC Irvine publicized the survey on the campus radio station and in printed and electronic signs on campus, as well as through email. UC Davis has advertised in buses and held UCUES in-person events.

(8) ***Design an Attractive, Informative Landing Page for the Survey Website.*** The website for the survey should be on every piece of information that goes out. The landing page should match bookmarks, table tents, flyers and posters. The landing page should include information about how the survey is used on campus and what improvements have been made because of it. It can include information about incentives, including pictures of winners of incentive prizes from the last administration with their testimonials. It can even include graphics comparing response rates by college or major to foster healthy competition. Publicize when gifts are being given away. When UC Berkeley announced its "Apple a Day" prizes on the website, response rates spiked. For an example, see http://ucues.berkeley.edu

(9) ***Hire Students to Coordinate Communications.*** Student workers can coordinate communications with student groups, write student-centered messages, identify good incentives, and staff in-person tabling and other promotional events. They can also respond to student emails about the survey. At UC Davis, student workers were able to leverage their relationships with clubs, student association leaders and others toraise interest in the survey and explain its importance. They were instrumental in writing effective reminders that caught students' attention because "they spoke in their language."

(10) ***Meet with Residence Hall Directors.*** The residence halls are important places for marketing. The residence hall director or her designee can distribute posters to R.A.s, expedite scheduling of table events, help to think through promotions that will appeal to students. For example, at UC Davis the residence director's team created an marketed a Greek competition.

(11) ***Contact Student Association Leaders to Solicit their Support.*** Student association leaders can be effective advocates for the survey. They can put up posters in their units and think of ways to reach students that adults may not anticipate.

(12) ***Provide Meaningful Incentives.*** A Rutgers study found that students there were motivated by the possibility of winning relatively sizable gift cards ($500), a little less so by smaller gift cards ($100), much less by football tickets, and still less by guaranteed small prizes given to those who completed the survey during the first week. The University of Florida, by contrast, found that football tickets were a major motivator (and during the Gators glory years, the University of Florida had response rates above 70%!) UC Berkeley has effectively used a mix of low- and high-value incentives throughout the survey administration (e.g. Cal T-shirts, signed sports memorabilia, and larger gifts).

(13) ***Consider Whether a Donation Campaign Would Work on Your Campus.*** Some students are more motivated by the volunteer spirit than by prizes. At UC Davis, the organizing department offers to donate $1 to a food pantry for every survey completed. The pantry was happy to work with the campus on this project, and communications and tabling events were geared to the donation campaign during that period.

(14) ***Understand that Students want their Opinions to be Heard and to Make a Difference.*** The Rutgers study showed that "having their opinion heard" was a major motivator for students, nearly as important as the possibility of winning sizable gift cards. Students also like to know that the results of the survey are used by the campus to make improvements. If you have examples of the positive impact of the survey on campus life, use them in invitations and follow-ups.

B. **Actions During Survey Administration**

(1) *Hold Weekly Staff Meetings to Check Progress.* These meetings are good places to troubleshoot problems, check whether the week's events are on track, and assign weekly goals.

(2) *Communicate with Colleges and Academic Departments about Response Rates.* UC Davis recommends starting these communications once month into survey administration. Colleges and departments can be motivated by competition. No department wants to be last at anything. For example, a department chair from Environmental Sciences might write majors, "We know that Environmental Sciences is the best major on campus. Let's show it by having the best response rate on campus to this important survey. So far, we are close but not at the top…"

(3) *Answer Student Emails Promptly, Personalizing Responses rather than Using Canned Answers.* Reputations for considerateness, promptness, and valuable feedback circulate, as do reputations for inconsiderateness, tardiness, and perfunctory feedback.

(4) *Publicize Prize Winners Widely.* Make sure that winners are informed and if they don't claim prizes, they are contacted again. Posted names, pictures and testimonials from winners can help stimulate interest in the survey by making it seem more real to students. Campuses like UC Berkeley post the names, pictures, and testimonials of students on the UCUES website.

(5) *Update Key Campus Personnel Periodically*. These updates should include information about response rates and reminders for them to continue to promote the survey.

(6) *If Response Rates Lag, Consider Keeping the Survey Open through Early Summer.* If you keep the survey open, develop a Summer response rate campaign tailored to groups whose responses have lagged. This can include contacting lagging academic departments or student clubs and organizations that have active memberships among individuals from lagging groups.

(7) *Keep Excellent Records about Daily Response Rates.* Daily charting of response rates can be keyed to communications and events that occurred immediately preceding spikes to help determine strategy for the future. For example, messages from popular figures on campus (even the campus mascot!) can lead to spikes in responses, while others may have minimal effect.

(8) *Collect Data on Student Subpopulations whose Members have High and Low Response Rates.* Future campaign thinking can focus on how to reach student groups with low response rates. Keep records by college, major, and student subpopulation groups.

C. **Actions Following the Survey**

(1) *Share Results of the Survey with Administrators and Department Chairs.* The results should be shared with deans, department chairs, student affairs officers, and others on campus who have a strong interest in results. Some campuses, such as UC Riverside, have featured findings about the campus in Survey Briefs that go out to faculty and staff via campus email.

(2) *Share Results with Students.* Also share highlights of the survey with students. Students want to know that their voices have been heard. If the administration plans to make any changes to university policies or practices because of survey results, make sure to publicize those changes widely.

D. **Contacts**

This document mentions several campuses that have been leaders in developing methods to raise response rates. SERU/UCUES contacts at these universities are as follows:

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