EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Encouraging Students to Complete the Student Opinion Survey (SOS)

Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs

In the past, UB response rates for the SUNY Student Opinion Survey have been quite low (15.0% or less of the undergraduate population). The purpose of our research with *UB Advocates* (trained student volunteers) was to examine factors that will encourage students to respond to the survey during the 2009 administration.

Two focus groups were conducted to collect data from 16 participants. An additional 24 *UB Advocates* participated by completing an on-line survey containing questions parallel to those asked in the focus groups discussions. The data presented here are based on the responses of these 40 participants.

Based on these students' responses to our questions, we can conclude the following:

- The marketing message must include the relevance of the survey to them, and this message must be communicated in as many forms as possible.
- The appropriate use of incentives seems to be the primary factor that encourages student responding, and the greater number of chances to win the more likely students will be to complete the survey.
- Results must be shared with students to validate their responding and let them know that it was worthwhile for them to complete the survey.
- If students know survey results are actually being used on campus to create positive change, they will be more likely to respond to other surveys in the future.

Time will tell if implementing these suggestions increases responses for the 2009 administration of the Student Opinion Survey, as well as for future administrations.

BRIEF: Encouraging Students to Complete the Student Opinion Survey (SOS)

The Student Opinion Survey (SOS) is a SUNY-wide survey administered every three years to assess undergraduate student satisfaction. In 2009 for the first time, UB is administering a parallel version for graduate and professional students. Undergraduate participation has been traditionally low (around 15.0% or less of the eligible population for the 2006 administration). Low response rates and non-response bias have been barriers to using the results of the SOS to enact campus-wide changes. Consequently, in preparation for the 2009 administration, we were interested in finding ways, based on the student perspective, to increase response rates. We chose to address the issue in focus groups with *UB Advocates[1]*.

Participants and Procedures

We conducted 2 focus groups with 16 students. In addition, those UB Advocates who were unable to attend focus groups were given the opportunity to participate via a web survey containing questions parallel to those asked in the focus groups (24). In all, 40 students provided feedback. Over two-thirds of the participants (28) are female, and over half (23) have been involved as UB Advocates for at least one year. Over three-quarters (34) of the participants are undergraduates, with 3 freshmen, 6 sophomores, 7 juniors, and 18 seniors. Of the 28 domestic students, 18 identify as white, 4 as African American, 1 as Asian, and 5 as other or unknown. The international students come from China (3), India (4), Korea (1), Libya (1), Malaysia (1), Nigeria (1), and Rwanda (1). The schools/colleges represented are Architecture and Planning (1), Arts and Sciences (14), Engineering (7), Management (8), Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (2), Nursing (7), and Pharmacy (1). On average, the undergraduate participants began the semester with a QPA of 3.29, and the graduate/professional participants began with a 3.60.

Results

Strategies for Communicating with Students

Before the focus groups began, students were asked to write on an index card the means through which they prefer to receive official communication from the university. If they listed more than one mechanism, they were to then rank them in order of preference, with a rank of "1" indicating that the source was the *most* preferable. Table 1 presents the methods of communication that were generated, along with the number of students who mentioned each and the average ranking of each. In spite of the fact that we often hear that students rarely open their university e-mail accounts, the students who attended the focus groups indicate that it remains an important source of communication for them. However, since focus group participants are a unique contingent of students, the best strategy is likely to duplicate e-mail efforts with as many of the other mechanisms as possible.

Table 1: Student-Preferred Forms of Communication

Type of Communication	Frequency	Average Ranking
E-Mail	12	1.17
Student Union Banner	1	2.00
Automated Call	1	2.00
Personal Visit/Meeting/Class Reminders	4	2.75
Telephone	1	3.00
Information Tables in Campus Buildings	1	3.00
My UB	9	3.11
Flyers/Posters	7	3.29
Regular Mail	8	3.50
Text Messages	5	3.60
UB Learns	1	4.00
Bus Advertisements	1	4.00
Facebook	1	5.00
UB TV	1	5.00
Buffalo.edu	1	5.00

Strategies to Increase Student Awareness of and Responses to the SOS (i.e., Marketing Options)

UB Advocates offered many suggestions for strategies that Institutional Analysis can use to make students aware of the SOS, as well as to encourage them to actually complete the survey. Their suggestions encompass the entire survey administration process, from advertising and survey administration through reporting results. Their suggestions are outlined below.

Survey marketing: advertising. Although UB Advocates tend to respond to e-mail requests from university administrators, they suggest that e-mail must be used effectively to successfully market a survey. First, the e-mail message that is sent should be informal and concise. Students will be most responsive if it is sent via a listserv from groups with whom they are already involved, such as clubs and organizations and academic departments and schools. Finally, students would open e-mails that were forwarded by faculty members. Further, any connections that could be made between the survey and the academic side of the university would give the survey greater weight in the students' eyes. Posting information on chalk boards in classrooms is likely to bring surveys to students' attention. Even more important for bringing the survey to students' attention is a brief announcement by faculty members during class time.

UB Advocates suggest that the advertising materials point to the relevance of the survey for the students who will be responding. For example, marketing materials should emphasize results from past administrations of the survey that have led to positive changes around campus. Also, students may need to be reminded that positive campus change will occur only if they make a concerted effort to voice their opinions through surveys. Advertising materials should be distributed via several mechanisms, including banners and fliers posted around campus; large attention-grabbing posters hanging in high-traffic areas, including buses and shuttles; table tents in all campus dining areas; text and images added to all campus web sites; a Facebook group

devoted to advertising the survey; and ads in student publications. Finally, it is important that advertising is done on all three campuses.

Student in general and UB Advocates can be recruited to help market the survey. For example, students majoring in marketing might be interested in designing and delivering an advertising campaign for the SOS in return for internship credit. Also, campus organizations can be a very effective means of making students aware of survey opportunities and in encouraging them to participate. UB Advocates, in particular, often have ties with several other clubs and can promote the survey among these groups. A UB Advocates "Street Team" could be created to post fliers around campus, hand out cards in the Student Union and other high-traffic locations, and meet with the Graduate and Undergraduate Student Associations, as well as the Club Council, to garner additional support. Finally, UB Advocates can use "word of mouth" to "talk up" the SOS with students they know who enjoy taking surveys and/or show interest in university issues, both face-to-face and via social networking sites like Facebook.

In addition to posting information about the SOS *everywhere*, a single captivating event might be scheduled to encourage students to complete the survey on the spot. For example, one student suggests that a high-traffic area can be located where multiple computers with internet access can be set up. Music and food give-aways can be used to attract students to the location, and students who complete the survey on-site during the event are eligible for a prize-drawing at the end of the event.

Survey marketing: incentives. Prizes can be very important in helping students with limited time decide which surveys they will complete. However, incentives need to be used appropriately or they will not be effective. For example, students suggest that they are most likely to respond to a survey when there are many opportunities to win smaller, less expensive prizes than to those where there is a single chance to win a great prize. The ideal situation would be one in which every respondent received a token prize, like a cup of coffee, for responding. Also, if a series of surveys are administered, a system of "tiered responding" in which students receive more prizes for each survey completed would be very motivating. Finally, students need to know that people have actually won in the past. Perhaps posting the names of survey winners on a web site would be a way to encourage students to respond the next time around.

Although, from the students' perspective, opinions about specific incentives are best summarized as "one man's junk is another man's treasure," some general rules of thumb can be identified. For example, students seem to agree that t-shirts are so readily available to them that they have no motivating value whatsoever. While many students would be happy to respond to a survey to earn coupons for free food and beverages, not all are. Thus, other inexpensive items should be used as prizes, as well. Student suggestions include movie passes, USB drives, and money or pre-paid debit cards. In terms of grand prizes, flat screen televisions and the newest iPods are popular offerings.

Survey design and administration. Although our students are extremely technology oriented, they understand that a paper survey administered in a class setting where they are captive is more likely to be completed than an on-line survey that they can do "on their own time." They even suggest that, even if faculty are not willing to give up class time for a survey,

they could notify OIA when they are going to cancel class so that OIA staff members could use that class time to administer the survey.

Students do appreciate the flexibility of an on-line survey and like having the option available, however. Formatting of the instrument is very important to them, though. The format of the survey should be informal and non-academic in nature and more like the "fun" surveys that they complete on Facebook.

Reporting survey results. Students believe it is very important for them to see the results of the survey. They feel that seeing the results posted on a web site is a source of validation for responding to the survey. Knowing that someone has actually looked at the results and tried to make sense of them will be a motivator for responding to future surveys.

Conclusions

These students provide many practical suggestions for encouraging high response rates on the Student Opinion Survey. The marketing message must include the relevance of the survey to them, and this message must be communicated in as many forms as possible. However, the appropriate use of incentives seems to be the primary factor that encourages student responding, and the greater number of chances to win the more likely students will be to complete the survey. Results must be shared with students to validate their responding and let them know that it was worthwhile for them to complete the survey. If students know survey results are actually being used on campus to create positive change, they will be more likely to respond to other surveys in the future.

Carol VanZile-Tamsen, Office of Institutional Analysis;
Kathleen Bissonnette, Division of Student Affairs   3/4/09

---

[1]   UB Advocates are student volunteers who meet each semester to discuss campus issues with trained facilitators. Since students self-nominate into the UB Advocates program and those who attend a particular session do so based on the scheduling of the session, as well as their interest in a particular topic, they may not be representative of the entire population of UB students.