
BRIEF: Encouraging Students to Participate in University-Wide Survey Efforts

Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs

Many units around the university seek to understand student needs and concerns by administering on-line surveys to the student population. However, response rates tend to be low, and these rates decrease for students the longer that they are enrolled. Low response rates lead to non-response bias, i.e., information collected may have very little relevance for most UB students since most have not responded. This pattern of non-response is a major barrier to using results of university-wide survey efforts to enact campus-wide changes.

We chose to explore the issue of non-response, as well as methods of increasing response rates in an open-ended survey with *UB Advocates*¹. Twenty-four UB Advocates completed a web survey containing open-ended questions about survey participation at UB. Characteristics of these participants were described in an earlier brief².

Decline in Survey Participation

The first item explored on the survey relates to the decline in survey participation that we observe in the student body from the time that students matriculate as new freshmen or transfer students and the time they are seniors. Respondents were asked to explain this decline from their perspective. The most popular answer is that classes become more difficult and demanding, mentioned by 10 students. As they move into upper division classes, students must put more time and effort into their course work. This leaves them less time to participate in surveys.

Another common reason cited by students (11), concerns students' changing priorities. As they meet people and become more comfortable in the UB environment, they no longer have to participate in activities to build a social network. In addition, they become more concerned about using spare time for employment and/or internship activities, and they are more focused on graduation than anything else.

Related to these first two reasons is simply lack of time, mentioned seven times. As students progress, they spend more time working and in activities outside of school work, their schedules become busier, and they simply do not have the time they once did to participate in surveys. In addition, the novelty of college activities and their enthusiasm for participating begins to wane (6). They begin to perceive a lack of benefit to the surveys: the responses do not seem to influence administrative decision-making (6), and there is no obvious personal benefit or consequence related to participation (2). Most live and work off campus and are removed from on-campus issues and activities (3). They may feel that they have done their part, and, now, it is

time for new students to complete the surveys (1). One student suggests that, early on, efforts are made to incorporate surveys into existing processes (e.g., New Student Orientation and UB 101 classes), so students are more “captive” when it comes to responding. Only one student indicated that the flooding of student in-boxes with requests to participate in surveys is related to the decline in participation.

Obstacles to Current Participation

Of the reasons students identified for the decline in participation during a student’s career at UB, several are identified as the biggest obstacles to current participation in university survey efforts. These include lack of time (10), course demands (1), lack of personal benefit or incentive (9), and never seeing changes put into place in response to survey results (3). Some additional obstacles identified are poor advertising (3), the length of most surveys (1), the fact that students do not read e-mail (1), and privacy concerns (1).

Overcoming Obstacles to Participation

Many respondents believe that students can be encouraged to respond to university-wide survey efforts if appropriate incentives are used (11). Money and extra credit in courses are two examples; many other examples are presented in a related brief². Only two students indicated that advertising more would help. However, content of advertising appears to be important; several students (4) indicate that a detailed description in the advertising materials of the ways in which results are important to students is key to getting students to respond. In addition, it is important to share the results and how they have been used with all students once the survey is complete (4). Shorter surveys (3) administered at slow points during the semester (1) may also help. Finally, alternatives to e-mail should be explored for recruiting students (2).

Conclusions

The respondents offer several reasons why survey participation decreases during the college career, and they offer several helpful suggestions for increasing participation. Their recommendations are similar to those identified earlier²: the marketing message must include the relevance of the survey for students; appropriate incentives must be used; and results of the survey and any changes put into effect must be communicated to students to encourage future responding.

Carol VanZile-Tamsen, Office of Institutional Analysis;
Kathleen Bissonnette, Division of Student Affairs 12/1/09

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- 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.
 - 2 The brief is entitled “Encouraging Students to Complete the Student Opinion Survey” and is available at <http://apb.buffalo.edu/reports/briefs/studentexperiences/EncouragingSOSParticipation.pdf>.