

STUDENT LIFE SURVEY RESEARCH BRIEF: SURVEY INCENTIVE CHOICE EXPERIMENT

KEY FINDINGS

- Students were most likely to participate in the survey if they were guaranteed to receive \$3 in BuckID cash (18.7% response rate).
- Students who were given a choice of incentive were significantly more likely to fully complete the survey.

SURVEY INCENTIVES – INCLUDING AN INCENTIVE CHOICE

The Student Life Survey (SLS) is an annual research project that explores the involvement, engagement and sense of belonging of students at The Ohio State University. A random sample of 9,000 students were invited to take the 2024 SLS; 1,532 students responded for an overall response rate of 17.0%.

Web surveys are a popular and effective method for conducting research about students in higher education (Saleh & Bista, 2017); however, declining response rates make it difficult to fully understand the student experience (National Research Council, 2013). Higher education

scholars need to understand practices that boost response rates among students. This brief demonstrates how Ohio State student response rates differ by survey incentive option in the 2024 SLS.

Methods Results

All 9,000 students selected for the experiment were randomly assigned to one of three recruitment conditions, meaning each student saw one of three possible incentives (Groups A, B and C; see appendix for language used in each condition). Each group included 3,000 students. Students were not made aware of these different recruitment conditions.¹ Students in Group A were given a choice of incentive: guaranteed \$3 BuckID cash or a 1-in-100 chance to win \$50 BuckID cash; students in Group B were informed that they would be entered into a raffle to win \$50 in BuckID cash; students in Group C were informed that they would be given \$3 in BuckID cash for their participation.

Results

Table 1 presents the different conditions as well as the associated response rates. The differences in response rate between groups was statistically significant. Those in Group C (guaranteed small prize) were 1.16 times more likely to participate in the survey than those in Group A (choice of incentive, $p < .05$) and 1.23 times more likely to participate in the survey than those in Group B (chance of larger prize, $p < .01$). There was not a significant difference in likelihood of participation between Group A and Group B.

Table 1. Response Rates by Incentive Group

Incentive Group	Sample <i>n</i>	Response Rate	Response <i>n</i>	Sig.
Group A: Choice of Guaranteed \$3 or Chance to win \$50 BuckID cash	3,000	16.6%	497	**
Group B: Chance to win \$50 BuckID cash	3,000	15.8%	474	
Group C: Guaranteed \$3 BuckID cash	3,000	18.7%	561	
<i>Total</i>	9,000	17.0%	1,532	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

¹This study and design were approved by The Ohio State University's Institutional Review Board.

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Table 2 shows the differences in completion rate by incentive group. Students who completed 100% of the survey are considered “fully complete” while those who completed less than 100% are considered a “partial response.” Those in Group A (incentive choice) were 2.41 times more likely to complete the survey than those in Group B (chance of larger prize, $p < .001$) and 1.81 times more likely to complete the survey than those in Group C (guaranteed smaller prize, $p < .01$). There was not a significant difference in likelihood of fully completing the survey between Group B and Group C.

Table 2. Survey Completion Rate by Incentive Group

Incentive Group	Response <i>n</i>	Fully Completed Survey	Completed <i>n</i>	Sig.
Group A: Choice of Guaranteed \$3 or Chance to win \$50 BuckID cash	497	91.1%	453	***
Group B: Chance to win \$50 BuckID cash	474	81.0%	384	
Group C: Guaranteed \$3 BuckID cash	561	85.0%	477	
<i>Total</i>	1,532			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3 presents the differences in incentive choice for those in Group A. Of those who were given a choice of incentive, significantly more students opted to enter a chance to win \$50 instead of receiving a guaranteed \$3.

Table 3. Incentive Choice ($n = 497$)

Incentive Choice	%	Sig.
Chance to win \$50 BuckID cash	53.7%	*
Guaranteed \$3 BuckID cash	46.3%	
<i>Total</i>	100.0%	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4 breaks down the difference of incentive choice for those in Group A by educational rank—whether a student is an undergraduate, graduate or professional student. Graduate students were 1.98 times more likely than undergraduate students ($p < .01$) and 2.11 times more likely than professional students ($p < .05$) to select the chance to win \$50. There was not a significant difference in incentive choice between undergraduate and professional students.

Table 4. Incentive Choice by Educational Rank

Incentive Choice	Undergraduate ($n = 284$)	Graduate ($n = 168$)	Professional ($n = 45$)	Sig.
Chance to win \$50 BuckID cash	48.2%	64.9%	46.7%	**
Guaranteed \$3 BuckID cash	51.8%	35.1%	53.3%	
<i>Total</i>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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Conclusion

Students were most likely to participate in the survey if they were guaranteed a small cash prize (18.7% response rate) relative to if they were entered into a raffle to potentially win a larger cash prize (15.8%) or given the choice between two incentives (16.6%). Students who were given a choice of incentives were significantly more likely to fully complete the survey compared to students in other incentive groups.

Of those within the incentive choice group, students were significantly more likely to select entry to win a larger cash prize than a guarantee of a small cash prize. This difference is driven by the fact that graduate students are significantly more likely to select a chance to win a large cash prize than a guarantee of a smaller cash prize.

References

- National Research Council. (2013). *Nonresponse in Social Science Surveys: A Research Agenda*. Roger Tourangeau and Thomas J. Plewes, Editors. Panel on a Research Agenda for the Future of Social Science Data Collection, Committee on National Statistics. Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Saleh, A., & Bista, K. (2017). Examining factors impacting online survey response rates in educational research: Perceptions of graduate students. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation*, 13, 63-74.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT LANGUAGE

Subject line: [Chosen first name], make your voice heard about the student experience at Ohio State with this short survey

Hi [Chosen first name],

Tell us about your experience as an Ohio State student!

Each year, we send out the Student Life Survey to about 20% of Ohio State's student body. By taking part in this brief survey, you are serving as a representative for your fellow students. Your feedback will help inform us about students' experiences at Ohio State and help improve the services we offer to our Buckeye community.

Your input is incredibly valuable, and your response is confidential. If you choose to participate, you will **[CONDITION 1: have the choice of receiving \$3 in BuckID cash OR entering a raffle to win \$50 in BuckID cash. If you choose to enter to win \$50 in BuckID cash the odds of winning will be 1 in 100.]**

[CONDITION 2: be entered into a raffle to win \$50 in BuckID cash. The odds of winning are 1 in 100.]

[CONDITION 3: You will receive \$3 in BuckID cash.]

The survey takes just 10 minutes or less. Please click the link below and use your voice to make a difference.

[link]

If you have questions, please contact us at SL-surveys@osu.edu.

Sincerely,