

# STUDENT LIFE SURVEY RESEARCH BRIEF: SURVEY INCENTIVES

## KEY FINDINGS

- Students were more likely to participate in the survey if they were guaranteed to receive \$3 in BuckID cash (18.4% response rate).
- Students who were entered into a raffle to win \$10 in BuckID cash (1 in 5 odds of winning) had the lowest response rate (13.4%).

## SURVEY INCENTIVES – INCLUDING GUARANTEED INCENTIVE

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 total of 8,500 students were invited to take the 2023 SLS; 1,338 students responded for an overall response rate of 15.7%.

Scholars note that web surveys have become an increasingly popular method for conducting research about higher education environments and student outcomes (Saleh & Bista, 2017), but response rates are declining (National Research Council, 2013). Therefore, it is important for higher education researchers to better understand the factors that encourage strong response rates across diverse student

populations. The aim of this brief is to illustrate how Ohio State students responded to different recruitment incentives designed to encourage their participation in the SLS.

## Methods & Results

All 8,500 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 comprised approximately 2,833 students. Students were not made aware of these different recruitment conditions.<sup>1</sup> Students in Group A were informed that they would be entered into a raffle to win \$10 in 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.

The following table 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 1.5 times more likely to participate in the survey than those in Group A (chance of smaller prize,  $p < .001$ ) and 1.2 times more likely to participate in the survey than those in Group B (chance of larger prize,  $p < .01$ ). There was also a significant difference in likelihood of participation between Group A and Group B; students in Group B (chance of larger prize) were 1.2 times more likely to participate in the survey than those in Group A (chance of smaller prize,  $p < .05$ ).

Incentive Group	<i>n</i>	%	Sig.
Group A: Chance to win \$10 BuckID cash	380	13.4%	
Group B: Chance to win \$50 BuckID cash	438	15.5%	***
Group C: Guaranteed \$3 BuckID cash	520	18.4%	
<i>Total</i>	1,338		

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

<sup>1</sup>This study and design was approved by The Ohio State University's Institutional Review Board.

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## Conclusion

Students were more likely to participate in the survey if they were guaranteed a small cash prize (18.4% response rate) relative to if they were entered into a raffle to potentially win a larger cash prize. Students who were entered into a raffle to win \$50 in BuckID cash were more likely to participate (15.5% response rate) than students who were entered into a raffle to win \$10 in BuckID cash (13.4% response rate). These results suggest that students prefer a small, guaranteed cash prize relative to being entered into a raffle to win a larger cash prize, but if a raffle entry incentive is offered, larger prizes with smaller odds of winning are preferred. Keep in mind, however, that the odds of participating when provided a guaranteed incentive over a chance to win a much larger sum of money were not practically much higher. In terms of response rate, the difference was 3%. Given the cost of a guaranteed incentive, consider the importance of the survey relative to the financial burden. These findings should inform future efforts concerning choice of recruitment incentives for survey participation.

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

Hi [preferred first name],

Tell us about your experience as an Ohio State student!

Each year, we send out the Student Life Survey to just 10% 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  
[**GROUP A**: be entered into a raffle to win a \$10 BuckID deposit. The odds of winning are one in five.]  
[**GROUP B**: be entered into a raffle to win a \$50 BuckID deposit. The odds of winning are one in 100.]  
[**GROUP C**: be given a \$3 BuckID deposit.]

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](mailto:SL-surveys@osu.edu).

Sincerely,  
[Signature]