

STUDENT LIFE SURVEY RESEARCH BRIEF: SURVEY INCENTIVES

KEY FINDINGS

- Students were significantly more likely to participate in the survey if offered an incentive.
- Students who were offered an Apple Watch had the highest response rate of all incentive groups (**19.4%**), while students who were not offered an incentive had the lowest response rate, (**11.4%**).

SURVEY INCENTIVES

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 8,200 students were invited to participate in this year's survey; 1,329 students responded for a response rate of 16.2%.

This year, the SLS looked at the effect of incentives on students' participation in web surveys. Scholars note that as web surveys have become an increasingly popular method for conducting research about higher education environments and student outcomes (Saleh & Bista, 2017), response rates have declined (National Research Council, 2013). Statistical adjustments can account for this limitation to an extent, but even these measures may be inadequate for especially small samples (Fosnacht, Sarrah, Howe, &

Peck, 2017). Therefore, it is important for higher education researchers to better understand the factors that encourage strong response rates to web surveys across diverse student populations. The aim of this brief is to illustrate how Ohio State students responded to different conditions designed to incentivize their participation in the SLS.

Methods & Results

All 8,200 students selected for the sample were randomly assigned to one of four incentive conditions (Groups A, B, C and D). Each group comprised 2,050 students. When students were invited to participate in the survey, they were offered an incentive that corresponded to their assigned group. Students were not made aware of these different incentive conditions.¹ The following table presents the different incentive conditions as well as the associated response rates. The differences in response rate between groups was statistically significant.

Incentive Group	<i>n</i>	%	Sig.
Group A: Apple Watch	398	19.4%	
Group B: 1 of 12 \$25 BuckID deposits	351	17.1%	***
Group C: 1 of 60 \$5 BuckID deposits	347	16.9%	
Group D: No incentive	233	11.4%	
<i>Total</i>	1,329	100.0%	

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

Conclusion

Offering an incentive had a positive effect on students' response rate. Students were slightly more likely to participate if they had low odds of winning a high-value item (Group A), than if they had higher odds of winning a low-value item (Group C). Nevertheless, offering any incentive improved students' response rate compared to no incentive at all. These findings should inform future efforts concerning survey design and choice of incentives.

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

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References

- Fosnacht, K., Sarraf, S., Howe, E., & Peck, L. K. (2017). How important are high response rates for college surveys? *The Review of Higher Education*, 40(2), 245-265.
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