Survey Research During COVID-19: The Challenges Grow Even Larger

Matthew Grandstaff
and Karen Webber

Louise McBee Institute
of Higher Education
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
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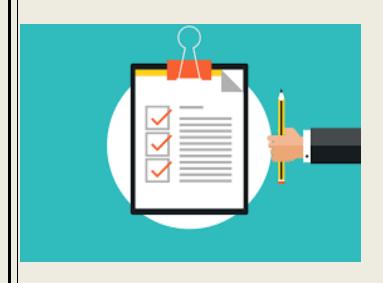# Survey research in the digital age is more challenging than ever…

Low response rates occur for a number of reasons:

- Electronic surveys tempt us to lengthen the survey
- Respondent concerns of data security or sharing identifiable info

- Procedures due to COVID-19 exacerbate many existing threats:
  - Access to internet (especially for some students in rural areas)
  - Increase in number of emails received (and in timely manner)
  - Possible concern for insignificance of a random survey request
  - "survey fatigue'

Today's session

- To discuss challenges of survey research during the COVID-19 pandemic

- This presentation draws on the experience of executing a spring 2021 multi-institution survey in the midst of an ongoing pandemic

- Identify challenges faced over the past year

- Ask for your experiences and ideas

- Offer recommendations for best practices that are applicable for the future (maybe post-pandemic?)

Survey Research in IR Today

- Often a substantial task for IR professionals
- Important to provide student and staff attitudes, perceptions, use of services
- Recent 'pulse' surveys
- Can be a good source of information for policy makers
- Can help position IR to be a valued member of the decision support team

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The Challenges of Survey Research

- Low Response Rates
- Decide if purchase or develop
  - $ to buy or time to develop, pilot, administer via e-form or paper
- Small samples (can impact generalizability)
- Incomplete Responses (missing data can impact analyses)
- Determine if incentives are needed, and if so how to fund

However – Survey Information Can be Valuable!

Good survey research includes:

– Knowledge of relevant literature

– Guided by relevant theory

– Follows established methods and analytic techniques, including:

- Using a credible instrument (buy or build)

- Being intentional in determining sampling frame (random versus select sample)

- Achieving good response rate

- Using proper analytic techniques

- Reporting meaningful results in an understandable way

The WREA Project

- NSF-Funded multi-Institutional Grant to examine the effect of students' access to work-related experiential activities (WREAs)

- An important facet is geographic location

- Engineering and computer science students at six institutions in GA

- Mixed Methods design to examine perceptions and experiences from students, career center directors, employers, and company recruiters
  - Quantitative survey data from students in spring 2021 and spring 2022
  - Individual interview data from career center directors (2021) and sample of students (2022)
  - Focus group interviews with employers and company recruiters (2021 and 2022)
  - Observations of career fairs (online 2021) in-person (2022)

- Because project is grant-funded, we had the luxury of working with an external survey center who would assist in the development and administration of the surveys

Briefly- Literature & Conceptual Framework

Before we go further, let's step back and briefly discuss salient literature and theories that guide our thinking about survey research

- Survey response rates are related to a number of factors including:
  - solicitation and distribution method (Dillman, 2000, Evangelista, Poon & Albaum, 2012; Suskie, 1996; Vannette & Krosnick, 2018)
  - incentives (Singer & Ye, 2013)
  - topic salience (Powers & Valentine, 2009)
  - survey fatigue (Porter, Whitcomb & Weitzer, 2004)
  - access to computer & Internet (Jaggars et al., 2021)

- All aspects of online surveys (invitation memo, reminder emails, survey appearance, date sent) play a role in how frequently students respond (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003)

Theoretical Framework – Intrinsic Motivation

- Drawing on Deci & Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, we framed participation as an extension of a student's intrinsic motivation

- Students are expected to pursue opportunities that lead to personal growth and development. The motivation to do so lies not in external validation, but instead comes from the desire to achieve a stronger sense of self

- Due to intrinsic factors, students are more likely to respond to a survey that was presented as an opportunity to better understand the topic of our study (work-related experiential activities, WREAs) and the ways in which they are experienced by participants

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Steps in WREA Survey Development and Administration

1. Survey (and total project) approved by IRB (at all 6 institutions)
2. Draft Instrument, reviewed by Advisory Committee
3. Instrument pilot tested
4. FERPA Directory Information obtained from IR colleague at each institution
5. Email address file cleaned (correct email addresses, no duplications)
6. Contacted each institution to ensure survey was Whitelisted
7. Worked with Survey Research Center to:
   - ensure best wording (instrument and cover letter)
   - Test the Qualtrics version (links for each institution)
   - Send the Qualtrics version to each IRB office for approval
   - administered in March 2021

Tasks in the Survey Administration

- Administered at each institution on a schedule
  - need to work with unique institutional schedules
- Students received at least three reminders from the Survey Center
- In some institutions, Career Center colleague sent additional reminders
- In some institutions, college/dept colleagues sent additional reminders
- In COVID environment, didn't see other options beyond online survey with email invitation

- Final response rate hovered around 10-12%

Survey Distribution and Reminder Schedule

	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C	Institution D	Institution E
Initial Invitation	March 16	March 18	March 23	March 23	April 1
First Reminder	March 25	March 30	April 1	March 31	April 7
Second Reminder	March 31	March 31	April 7	April 8	April 13
Third Reminder	April 13	April 7	April 21	April 21	April 21
Fourth Reminder	April 21	April 15			
Fifth Reminder		April 21			
Survey Close	May 18	May 18	May 18	May 18	May 18

Survey Response Breakdown

	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C	Institution D	Institution E	Combined
Sample Size	2,300	8,211	520	112	127	11,270
Undeliverable	1	7	0	0	0	8
Adjusted Sample Size	2,299	8,204	520	112	127	11,262
Responses	307	1,084	56	6	20	1,473
Excluded	7	7	1	0	11	26
Valid Responses	300	1,077	55	6	9	1,447
Response Rate	13.0%	13.1%	10.6%	5.4%	7.1%	12.8%

Challenges Faced: Possible Contributors to Our Response Rates

- Survey fatigue (? And COVID fatigue?)
- Other factors related to intrinsic motivation
- Timing
- Topic
- Mode of survey administration (Qualtrics)
- Small pool of students at some institutions
- Cover letter wasn't compelling enough
- Variation in institutional survey culture
- Incentive not perceived to be valuable enough to motivate

Other Challenges Faced Due to The Pandemic

- Difficulty building strong relationship with colleagues across the project's institutions

- All communications by phone and zoom – no personal interaction

- Partnering with Survey Research Center added an extra layer of email, phone calls, zoom chats, need to schedule more meetings that fit everyone's schedule

- Institution officials were cognizant of the digital burden of students during the pandemic, thus survey requests & reminders were scrutinized

Reflection on the Survey and Look to Next Year

Positive Points:

– Received over 1,400 usable responses

– We have interesting data that will inform our project

– Three open-ended questions have many interesting comments leading to content analysis

– Findings provided ideas for additional questions to include next time

Less than Positive:

– PI wasn't happy with a 10% response rate

– Less confident in how much we can generalize our findings

– Time involved to complete all preparations for the survey administration was extremely high

Your Experiences with Survey Research

Have you administered survey(s)

- To which population(s)?

- How successful were they?

- How/ were your survey(s) impacted over the past year (pandemic)?

- Have you seen a return to pre-COVID-19 response rates?

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Mindful of COVID-19-- Best Practices For Survey Research in IR

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Mindful of COVID-19 – Best Practices For Survey Research in IR

- Understand the literature on survey research, consider relevant theory

- Understand your target population (how they engage with surveys, how to make meaningful contact, best strategies for reminder emails, is incentive needed)

- Consider Survey Format

  - Mode of delivery- internet access, accessible across phone & laptop

  - Wording - succinct length of survey, easily understood language

- Collaborate- work with different organizations/offices/etc. to allow access from multiple angles, know other open surveys

- Have a plan and then carry out accurate analysis and reporting

Questions? Comments?

- Matt   matthew.grandstaff@uga.edu
- Karen   kwebber@uga.edu

Thank you!

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