The Washington State University Doctoral Student Experience Survey

The Washington State University Doctoral Student Experience Survey was conducted from March to May in 2013 by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at WSU using web and mail modes. This study was done in order to understand issues that doctoral students face while completing their degrees, and to assess their involvement in interdisciplinary research activities. The survey request was sent to the entire population of “all but dissertation” (ABD) doctoral students at WSU, which was approximately 600 individuals. These were students who had successfully completed their preliminary examinations and were working on their dissertation research. This included students who were enrolled for credit as well as those who were not officially enrolled but were still actively working to complete their dissertations.

The web and paper versions of the questionnaire contained exactly the same questions in the same order, and were designed to resemble each other in appearance as much as possible in order to reduce measurement differences across modes. On the web, each item appeared on a separate web page. In the paper version, each item was enclosed within an individualized colored box to mimic the page-by-page construction of the web questionnaire. Both versions utilized the same images, colors, fonts, and question layouts, except in some instances where mode-specific features required slight differences to improve the user experience.

The list of eligible students was obtained from university administration. The SESRC contacted eligible students using a combination of two postal mail and three email contacts. The first contact was sent via postal mail to inform students of the nature of the survey and ask for their participation. At this time, students were only given the option of responding to the web survey (the paper/mail option was not introduced until the final postal contact). The invitation letter was printed on university letterhead and included the survey website address and an access code to login to the questionnaire, as well as a token cash incentive (a $2 bill). This mailing was enclosed in a standard #10 envelope. In order to encourage response, this letter was written to appeal to the specific stage of graduate study of the targeted students.

The second contact was an email message sent shortly after the invitation to build off the initial message and provide an easy and convenient electronic link to the survey website. Approximately one week later, non-respondents received another email message, which contained a brief reminder to participate and a link the survey website. The fourth contact was sent via postal mail. It was enclosed in a 6.5 x 9.5-inch tan self-sealing envelope, and included a paper version of the questionnaire and stamped 6.5 x 9.5-inch tan self-sealing return envelope (see image files of envelopes). The questionnaire and return envelope were folded in half to fit into the outgoing envelope. One last email message was sent as a follow-up to the paper questionnaire mailing. This message informed remaining non-respondents the study was coming to a close and urged them to reply soon.

This contact strategy proved very successful in drawing in a great number of responses. The overall study response rate was nearly 77%, which is considerably higher than the response rates to surveys of WSU undergraduates that have been conducted by the SESRC in recent years using similar methods.

For more information on the WSU Doctoral Student Experience Survey, see: