



Online Survey Administration Response Rates

Comparison: Response rates for in-class administration vs. online administration

In-class

Sampled students are, in one sense, a captured audience; as such they are likely to complete the survey.

Online

Response rates for online surveys are much more dependent on the survey population being willing to connect to and complete the survey. Therefore, it is important to communicate the importance of the survey to students.

Response rates for the 2019 SENSE 3-year cohort

Average response rate across 270 colleges for the in-class *SENSE* administration in the 2019 3-year cohort was 42%.

Response rates for the 2020 online SENSE participants

Average response rate across 28 colleges for the online *SENSE* 2020 administration was 11.5% (see additional information below).

Adequate response rate for online administration

The size of a college and the number of respondents are as equally important, if not more so, as the actual response rate for an online survey administration. As Table 1 illustrates, one size does not fit all; the more important measure is the total number of respondents. In short, the larger the college or target population (e.g., entering students), the smaller the response rate needs to be to provide a robust sample.

Table 1

| College | Target Population Size | Number of Respondents at | | | |
|---------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 5% | 10% | 15% | 25% |
| A | 600 | 30 | 60 | 90 | 150 |
| B | 1,500 | 75 | 150 | 225 | 375 |
| C | 4,500 | 225 | 450 | 675 | 1,125 |
| D | 8,000 | 400 | 800 | 1,200 | 2,000 |
| E | 15,000 | 750 | 1,500 | 2,250 | 3,750 |

Table 2 presents the response rates for the online *SENSE* 2020 administration by size of institution.

Table 2

| College Size (# of colleges) | Average Response Rate | Maximum Response Rate | Average Number of Respondents |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Small | 14.7% | 31.7% | 73 |
| Medium | 11.8% | 28.9% | 147 |
| Large | 7.3% | 15.0% | 185 |
| Extra-large | 7.0% | 8.0% | 321 |

Number of respondents needed to conduct breakout analyses

Research has found that reliable population estimates can be achieved with as few as 50–75 respondents per group. For example, with a breakout analysis of traditional- vs. nontraditional-age students, approximately 100–150 respondents would be necessary to conduct analyses.

Representativeness or response bias

Research shows that full-time students and female students are over-represented in online surveys; therefore, it is important to note the distribution of respondent demographics compared to actual enrollment. A high response rate does not necessarily mean that the respondents will be representative of the overall population. Take for example a situation in which the response rate is 50%. If the college population consists of 55% women and 45% men, but the respondents consist of 75% women and 25% men, women are over-represented and, thus, the sample is biased. However, this bias can be adjusted by weighting.

Weighting

As in the past, the Center will include weights in the raw data file. As soon as we have a final data set that includes surveys from all participating colleges (both online and in-class administrations), Center research staff will analyze the demographic distribution of respondents compared to demographic distributions reported to IPEDS nationally. Where the differences indicate differences between these data, an appropriate weighting formula will be created. This will be included in the raw data file with the variable name IWEIGHT. The derivation of weights and weighting formula will be published on the website.

The Center's research team is here to help. If you have questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to us at data@cccse.org.