Does Mailing a Post Card to Students Improve Response Rates?

RAEAL MOORE, PHD, AND BEN EARNHART, MA

Introduction

A random sample of students who took the ACT test in either April or June of 2016 were invited to participate in an online survey via an email invitation (N = 35,047[1]). To study whether mailing post card invitations to students improves response rates, a portion of these test-takers were randomly assigned to be sent a post card. In addition, students who were sent a post card were randomly assigned to either receive one that pictured a female student or one that pictured a male student. All post cards described the research study and provided the student with the survey link. All groups received similar invitation via email. Three research questions were investigated.

Raeal Moore is a senior research scientist specializing in survey methodological research and research on education best practices in P-12 schools.

Benjamin Earnhart is a research scientist in Survey Research.

Research Question 1: Does sending a post card to students' improve response rates?

The results indicate that sending a post card to invite students to participate in an online survey did not improve response rates appreciably (Figure 1). A total of 5.3% of students who received the post card invitation responded to the survey, versus 5.0% for those students who were not sent a post card. This difference was not statistically nor practically significant.

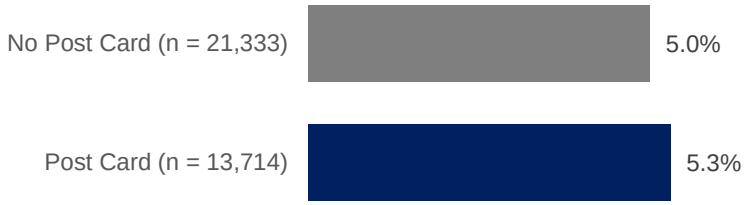

Figure 1. Response Rates, by Post Card Status

[1] This is part of a larger study (N = 58,559) seeking to understand the impact that financial incentives and post card invitations had on response rates. Only the effects of post card invitations are provided in this report. Students were randomly assigned to receive either the post card or the incentive, but not both.

Acknowledgement

A special thank you to Emily Uhl, who designed the post cards.

Sending postcards may be ineffective as well as relatively expensive, as it cost approximately $7 per post card, per completed survey compared to essentially $0 to send an email.

Research Question 2: Does the picture on the post card have an impact on response rates?

Figure 2 shows that the picture on the post card did not have an impact on response rates. Of those students who were sent a post card, both male and female post card images were associated with 5.3% response rates. In addition, the picture on the post card did not have a differential impact on response rates relative to the overall post card response rate.

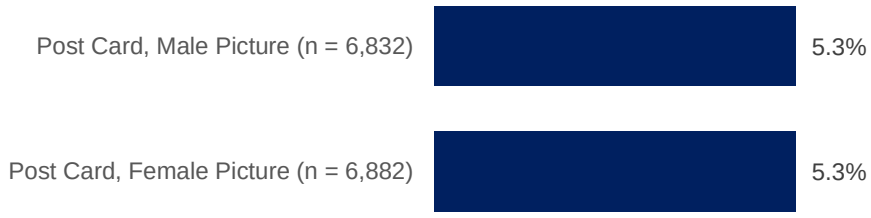

Figure 2. Response Rates, by Post Card Picture

Research Question 3: Does the picture on the post card have a differential impact on response rates based on the gender of the survey respondent?

Using a picture of a male student on the post card invitation had a differential impact on male and female survey respondents (see Figure 3). Providing female respondents with a male-picture post card resulted in a slightly higher response rate (6.7%) than providing them with a female-picture post card (6.3%) or no post card at all (6.0%). The opposite effect was found for male survey respondents. Males, when provided with a male-picture post card, responded at the lowest rate (3.5%), which was even lower than when no post card at all was provided (3.8%). Although these differential effects by gender are not statistically significant nor have any magnitude of an effect, it might be interesting to replicate this study, perhaps with a stronger stimulus such as an image on the header of each page of the survey itself.

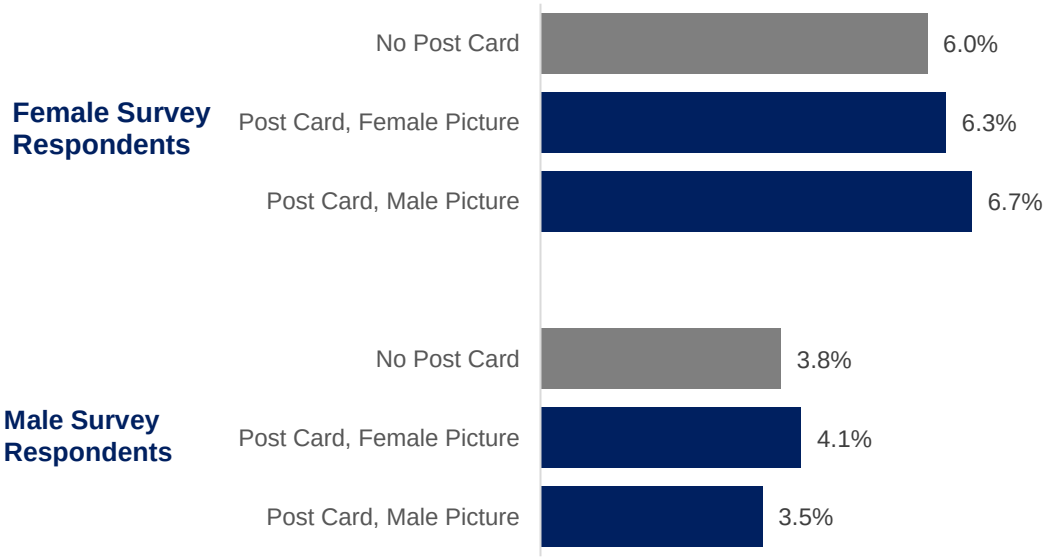

Figure 3. Response Rates, by Gender of the Survey Respondent and Post Card Category

It is worth noting that Figure 3 also shows that female students were more likely to complete the survey than were male students. Regardless of whether a post card was received or the gender of the picture on the post card, female students were statistically more likely to respond (6.0 – 6.7%, depending on the experimental group) than their male counterparts (3.5% – 4.1%).