

Institute of Education Sciences
National Center for Education Statistics

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STATISTICAL SCIENCES
TECHNICAL EXPERT PANEL REPORT

NCES STUDY & SURVEY RECRUITMENT
PLANNING & MATERIALS

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

TECHNICAL EXPERT REPORT ON NCES STUDY AND SURVEY RECRUITMENT PLANNING AND MATERIALS

JANUARY 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Surveys and data collections are in a time of flux in almost every aspect; and response rates are declining throughout the federal statistical agencies. Modes of communication are changing, population composition is shifting with new populations of interest emerging, and attitudes toward participation in federal surveys are deteriorating. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) charged a panel of technical experts to examine the impact on the response rate of the current recruitment process and recruitment materials. In particular, the panel was asked to consider the potential of four avenues for improving response and participation rates in NCES studies and surveys:

- i) Design of a recruitment strategy and monitoring its implementation;
- ii) Materials design and text;
- iii) Special issues in recruitment of hard-to-reach populations; and
- iv) Overall strategy to address recruitment at all levels from administrative decision-makers to participants.

The panel met via teleconferences with an in-person meeting at NCES on 4-5 January 2018.

Primary Recommendations

1. Recruitment should be planned holistically with coherent elements integrated into a process that can be monitored and managed in real time.
2. Recruitment strategies and materials should be developed to communicate effectively with the specific target population(s), based on understanding what motivates response from that population.
3. Language should be direct and clear, written specifically for the target audience (i.e., not a redact of language suitable for OMB); and text should be limited to the essential communication with required caveats and government terms separated and deferred to follow the essential communication.
4. NCES should take ownership of the recruitment process design, materials development, monitoring and analysis of effectiveness whether work is done in-house or is delegated to a contractor.

Specific Recommendations

1. In development, shift attention given to individual items to the full sequence of materials, the context, and the role of each item in that context. Make strategic decisions about modes of contact and modes of response.
2. Once in implementation phase monitor data collection assiduously to assess efficacy of the messaging campaign and make adjustments if needed. Focus on recipients opening the materials and acting on them.
3. Engage professional expertise (within NCES and/or from contractor) in materials development, testing and monitoring. Allow time for adequate testing and consequent revision of materials.
4. Language throughout all text (materials and website information) must be intelligible, i.e., in plain and compelling language, for the target population; and actions to be taken should be immediately clear.
5. NCES studies should prominently indicate NCES (or National Center for Education Statistics) on all materials and also should make direct links to the NCES website prominent. This branding should be universal for all NCES studies and surveys; specifically, this should include NAEP.
6. Standards and expectations for new recruitment materials need to be spelled out both for NCES staff and for contractors (included in the RFP), especially to avoid recycling materials which may have been developed from a different communication or for a different mode of contact.

Further Recommendations

In addition to the specific findings, the panel is concerned that NCES faces two structural challenges in effectuating recommended changes. Since NCES studies are not in synchrony, various NCES staff are grappling with different crucial issues associated with different stages of survey development, implementation, and data assembly. Hence no time is natural for sharing knowledge among staff about any particular stage. Secondly, the in-house technical expertise to continue to assure best practices is limited. While contractors do possess this expertise, a conflict of interest arises when the investment required for innovation may not be in the contractor's own interest. The panel notes that NCES leadership is well aware of this issue and has been proactive in encouraging innovation.

Additional specifically focused recommendations are included in the final section of this report.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STATISTICAL SCIENCES TECHNICAL EXPERT PANEL REPORT

PREFACE

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) charged the National Institute of Statistical Sciences (NISS) with convening a panel of technical experts to focus on the impact of the current recruitment process and materials on the response rate. In particular, the panel was asked to consider the potential for improving response and participation rates in NCES studies and surveys by re-examining and revising the recruitment process and the recruitment materials. Broad topics to be considered included: i) Design of a recruitment strategy and monitoring its implementation, ii) Materials design and text, iii) Special issues in recruitment of hard-to-reach populations, and iv) Overall strategy to address recruitment at all levels from administrative decision-makers to participants, i.e., from state departments of education to parents of school students.

The panel met first via teleconference to discuss extensive materials prepared by NCES staff and on 4-5 January 2018 met in person with presentations and discussions with NCES staff followed by closed sessions for deliberation. The panel held further closed teleconferences to prepare this report.

NCES STUDY AND SURVEY RECRUITMENT PLANNING AND MATERIALS

BACKGROUND

Concern with declining response rates to federal surveys and studies is pervasive across the federal statistical agencies including the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). For NCES the issue has many levels because the successful mounting of a survey or assessment of students requires the agreement of multiple administrative levels as well as the students and/or their parents. Consequently, recruitment of participants is complex and faces multiple opportunities for non-response.

NCES continues to confront the problem of stabilizing if not improving response rates and in this regard has addressed respondent burden and has studied the use of a variety of incentives at different levels. This Expert Panel was convened to examine another aspect of recruitment: planning and materials. The goal for the panel review was not to critique individual recruitment items; rather it was to establish a strategy for re-examining recruitment from the initial design and planning through the analysis of effectiveness of materials throughout the sequence of recruitment communications and after responses are received and data collection is complete.

In preparation, the panel received from NCES extensive materials for the National Household Education Survey (NHES) to give a complete picture of the recruitment for one survey. These included the submission package to OMB, copies of letters with envelopes as these appear to the addressees, links to online information, training resources, etc. The panel also received similar recruitment materials for the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), also less extensive materials for some other NCES surveys. In addition to materials, information was provided about survey response rates and about NCES's and contractors' experiments on recruitment materials options and modifications. Following initial presentations by NCES staff, queries by the panelists led to discussions about these topics and about results of focus groups and both formal and informal interactions with representatives of the target populations.

The organization of this report loosely follows the order of the four research topics. First recruitment is examined as an integrated campaign. Then key issues are presented in some detail beginning with consideration of language and content followed by the challenge presented by "hard-to-reach" populations. Once these issues have been outlined, strategies for addressing them are discussed. This report then turns to addressing emerging needs and opportunities in looking forward to studies now in the earliest stages of development. Finally, the report concludes with a summary of the panel's deliberations and a compilation of the findings from each section.

I. A PERSPECTIVE AND A FRAMEWORK

Perspective on Recruitment and Response

Surveys and data collections are in a time of flux in almost every aspect. Modes of communication are changing, population composition is shifting with new populations of interest emerging, and attitudes toward participation in federal surveys, if not surveys in general, are deteriorating. Response rates are declining throughout the federal statistical agencies; NCES is not an exception. Thus, comprehensive consideration of the messaging effort to gain participation in an NCES survey is extremely timely. Examination of the recruitment materials addresses one important component of the larger context of an entire messaging system.

NCES staff brought this issue to the fore, noting two prominent attributes of materials and letters sent to administrators and to potential participants: First, the actual recruitment materials (letters, etc.) in recent packages prepared for the Office of Management and the Budget (OMB) to approve show little change from those for past data collections. Second, the text of recruitment letters addressed to decision-makers and potential participants retain much of the “official agency language” of the NCES documentation and justifications for OMB rather than persuasive messaging targeted toward the specific population for the survey.

Development of a new survey or redesign of a previous survey presents an ideal opportunity to reconsider the recruitment process from the perspectives both of the agency/survey team and of the potential participants. Then with each new survey, including subsequent surveys in a longitudinal study, review and innovation become a continuing process.

NCES surveys and assessments vary in many important ways: longitudinal/cross-sectional, NCES/multi-agency, mandatory/voluntary, sampling design, target population composition, size, and incorporation of administrative records. What many of these data collections share is that within a single survey, recruitment often must occur at several levels from state education officers to district superintendents to principals to teachers to parents/students. Different surveys call for different approaches to improving response – but the process of developing a successful recruitment plan is not dissimilar.

Neither is improving response rate a one-dimensional goal for any of the complex NCES data collections. Equal or greater benefits to data quality may come from increasing response rates for populations of particular interest and for hard-to-reach populations than for populations already adequately sampled. And strategies may be specific for reaching these populations effectively.

The issues are complex; and NCES is familiar with them. Funding has been provided to explore some of these in regard to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP); other experimentation has been undertaken by NCES staff and contractors.

The next sections focus on articulating an approach with some specific strategies using 2020 NHES as the case study. First, an overarching approach to development of a comprehensive system is described; then the components and their interconnections are identified. Second, the roles of NCES and its contractors in this development process are considered. Finally, several issues for continuous improvement are addressed and future challenges are outlined.

II. PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGNING A RECRUITMENT PLAN

Challenge for Recruitment Practices and Materials

The NHES overall response rate dropped 8 percentage points from the 2012 to the 2016 survey (57% to 49%). Compensating for a drop of this magnitude will likely take a breakthrough approach based on a re-thinking of the recruitment process as composed of multiple integrated components. The start of such a breakthrough will depend on taking a holistic view of the recruitment process as a comprehensive messaging campaign. A breakthrough approach will need to draw on methodologic theory and research and on ongoing analysis of results, especially in the less-charted waters of recruitment and response via combinations of (newer) electronic media with traditional print modes.

The challenge for recruitment materials is to invite the engagement of each recipient with the goal of gaining participation. Many of the materials in the NHES recruitment package available for review have been adapted with minimal change from previous survey materials. Many read more like government documents than conversations and are weighted down by inclusion of extensive “required language,” especially when this precedes the information essential to engaging the recipient’s interest. Often the message conveys the value to the broader interest of the policy decision-makers or the research community but offers little compelling reason or more direct benefit to the recipient.

NCES staff appreciate the need for differentiated approaches for different surveys. Target populations differ and even within a particular population, follow-on phases or a longitudinal survey differ from the initial data collection and from cross-sectional surveys. However, the tendency to adapt from pre-existing documents and past survey materials is pervasive, leaving most written text in a tweaked “official” style.

Context for Recruitment Practices and Materials

An Integrated Approach

It appears that, to date, more time has been spent on individual materials (e.g., letters, brochures, emails) as separate items than on the overall response impact. By contrast, thinking holistically about a comprehensive messaging system implies: 1) planning for multiple coordinated contacts with each subsequent contact or attempt conditioned on those preceding, 2) setting a timeline for contacts, 3) mixing modes of contact, and possibly of response, 4) real time monitoring with analysis to know how well each step is working and for which populations. and 5) working within a development timeline that allows for review and consequent revision. Whatever the survey, the goal of the recruitment plan is for the recipient to:

- i. Open the envelope literally or metaphorically
- ii. Be motivated to respond
- iii. Know how to respond
- iv. Respond/take action

NCES has investigated incentives and appeals which act on motivation (ii). Still, the biggest increment in the response rate comes from the (first) follow-up, which acts on (i) and (iv).

Connectivity is essential; a follow-on should be more than the same letter resent. It should say something other than “we sent you a questionnaire and to the best of our knowledge, we have not heard from you.”

Simultaneous review of all individual items in the chain of connected communications is needed in order to create a coherent picture, to be able to correct inconsistencies and to eliminate redundancies. Timing of the message sequence is also critical to the effectiveness of the individual items. As recruitment moves increasingly toward utilization of mixed (and new!) modes of contact and of response, the real time analysis of results becomes doubly important to maximizing the success of the messages via their content and their timing.

Framework

By shifting initial attention to the context of the comprehensive system, the role of each item within that context can be evaluated. Strategic decisions based on the desired outcomes at each stage of recruitment involve the variation of content between waves, the choice of modes of contact and of response, the timing and the expectations for success (goals for response rate at each step). Something as simple as the juxtaposition of the items in sequence can quickly reveal “disconnects” between items, unhelpful message repetitions or opportunities to take advantage of alternative modes either of contact or of response.

Once an integrated campaign has been mapped, focus can shift to the first two challenges: How to get the envelope opened? How to get the message read?

The mode of delivery matters. The package matters. The message content matters. The language of the message matters.

Strategic Choice of Mode

Multiple contacts are essential to achieving a high response rate; strategic employment of multiple modes increases the potential for response. For example, a pre- or immediate post-contact follow-up can encourage response. An example of mixing modes for contact and response is following a mail contact with a quick email mentioning the previously sent letter and containing an electronic link to encourage online response.

NCES is aware of the strength of a multiple mode strategy. Current strategy for NHES very sensibly involves both recontacts and revised requests, decreasing the information request at subsequent attempts for initial contacts.

Branding

Branding is of increasing importance to successful recruitment as other surveys and requests from widely varied sources now flood mail, email and telephone. Branding is more than a logo. Branding for an organization means immediate recognition of the organization and association with its reputation. In essence recognition is the “who” (who is this?); reputation is the “what” (what do they do?) and the “how” (how well do they do it?). For NCES, communications and data collections need to be immediately distinguishable from everything else that reaches recipients’ mail boxes and emails. All these communications need to be immediately recognizable across surveys and assessments, including NAEP. Consequently, all NCES communications need to carry the NCES imprimatur, whether that is a prominent logo or simply a consistent, bold use of the NCES initials or spelled-out name that appears on all materials from envelope and every printed page to email header and website. Authenticity of the communication is evidenced by contact information and to website, hence these elements also should universally refer to NCES – in this case addressed to NCES as survey sponsor as well as the contractor. The pride that NCES staff clearly take in their particular surveys has resulted in giving prominence to titles and symbols or logos for the specific survey but this has come at the expense of

NCES identification. Symbols, logos, seals or letter head designs, no matter how attractive, successfully brand an organization only when they are already familiar to the recipient.

Effectiveness of Printed Materials

NHES relies heavily on traditional communication modes. So, for the initial letter, what is visible on the envelope is vital. Specifically, envelopes should include (bold) NCES identification (branding) and mention of any incentives. The first distinguishes the letter from other “official” communications and from the plethora of other surveys conducted by mail. The second is the inducement to open the envelope.

Once the envelope is opened the letter needs quickly and succinctly to address the reader with the key points:

- Why to respond (value to the reader)?
- What response is requested?
- How to send the response?

NCES focus group results from potential participants as well as informal conversations with administrators at several levels confirm that they all look for this information.

Specific deterrents to obtaining a response include: delaying the key points with descriptive or bureaucratic preambles, decreasing readability with uniformly small font, focusing on the NCES (government) viewpoint. Current letters for NHES appear have been redacted from OMB communications – to meet federal requirements – rather than written to speak to the recipient in comfortable and accessible language.

Brochures and other enclosures also seek to engage the recipient; hence similar guidelines apply as for letters. Pitfalls are also similar: generality, banality, redundancy, inconsistency, vagueness. By giving prominence to survey-specific logos and designs and minimizing the role of NCES, brochures risk being seen as advertisements for a marketing study rather than a federal survey. Examples of all these can be identified in the NHES current materials – both letters and brochures. While pictures draw attention to enclosures, the text needs to be worth reading.

For the questionnaire itself, the cover letter serves as the “call to action.” Review and editing of current cover letters can remove irrelevant, vague or repetitious sentences and at the same time alter the tone of the communication.

Language

Once the envelope has been opened, perhaps the single most important key to engaging the recipient is the language of the enclosures – the tone, the style, the vocabulary. Direct, clear and intelligible language fosters a conversation. Tweaking documents, e.g., those prepared for OMB, is not sufficient because the tone is not engaging and the style is official (sometimes officious). Unfamiliar vocabulary and the pervasive use of unfamiliar abbreviations contribute to the difficulty level of current NHES materials that is already high because of the writing style.

Direct, straightforward language makes clear the actions to be taken. Limiting text to the essential communication increases the likelihood that the recipient perseveres to read and respond. Applying these two principles in revision of current NHES and other data collection materials, whether directed toward administrators or toward students/parents, could substantially improve the materials. The investment required for such revisions would have a second pay off by serving as exemplars or templates for other surveys.

With regard to language required by OMB or by the Department of Education, the question is not whether but where and how. The opening paragraph is a poor choice for meeting these regulatory requirements; with creativity, alternatives may be found in headers, footers, side bars, overleaf or second pages, supplemented by website links. As surveys move to electronic form, new options may resolve this problem more readily.

III. STANDARDS AND DELEGATION OF DESIGN TASKS

Overview

Recruitment strategies and materials for NCES surveys and assessments are developed jointly by NCES staff and contractors. For NCES surveys and assessments other than NAEP, NCES relies on survey contractors with supervision by NCES staff in charge of the particular survey. Since NAEP is funded separately, contractors have included a commercial PR contractor to develop recruitment materials in addition to the contractors who design and conduct the data collections.

This “silo” approach to recruitment planning and materials development runs counter to rethinking the recruitment process in terms of an overall messaging system. Different contractors conduct the various NCES surveys, increasing the challenge to instituting a common approach. The convening of this panel attests to NCES’s awareness of limitations in the current approach and the need to set out a practicable plan for effectuating change.

Ownership/Branding

Ownership of the recruitment process ultimately belongs to NCES even though the survey contractor is a collaborator in this process from overall strategy to materials development at each stage to active monitoring and eventual analysis of effectiveness. And the survey contractor generally has more expertise and resources to develop and innovate individual items than NCES has on its own staff supervising any particular survey. In addition, the objectives of the two organizations do not necessarily align. The objective of NCES is to obtain the best product for the money awarded; the contractor’s objective is to meet standards and contractual requirements as efficiently (lowest cost) as possible.

Consequently, NCES needs a Center-wide approach to an integrated recruitment campaign with guidelines and standard practices covering the recruitment process strategy and each stage of its implementation, universal branding of NCES data collections, and integration with the NCES website and presence on electronic media.

Different surveys are conducted under different contracts. Each different contractor essentially works in a vacuum, making NCES branding surveys difficult without the complete picture. Realistically, NCES must take ownership and branding must be done at the Center level. Communication with contractors must follow, beginning with language in the RFP so that contractors know they must plan and think creatively about the messaging strategy.

Development at NCES of such an integrated campaign should be led by someone with the expertise to think about overall messaging systems who can then be a force for trying to connect and build synergy across all aspects of a system at NCES.

Standards and/or Best Practices Documents

In this collaborative situation between NCES and the survey contractor, NCES must rely on written standards, best practices documents and contractual requirements. These need to be both detailed

and comprehensive, linked explicitly to the planning and implementation timelines and including real-time measures of effectiveness and analyses of results. To illustrate, refined specifications for response rates might be by subpopulation of interest as well as by each attempted contact with real-time monitoring. This degree of detail would give a basis for understanding how well and for which subgroups each stage in the recruitment process is working and where attention should be directed for improvement.

A review by NCES staff of current NCES standards for recruitment materials (and other existing NCES documents related to survey planning) with attention to coordination among materials, to presentation and to content (including maximum reading level) can be followed by revisions and/or creation of new or additional standards and guidelines in the context of the integrated system.

Decision Points – Timelines and Quality Control Monitoring

Timelines have strategic importance, especially for large scale surveys that take two years or longer in their design and preparation. NCES already operates on carefully planned timelines that begin with the conception and continue to drafting the RFP for a survey and on through the transfer of data to NCES. This same careful planning should be applied to the messages. Laying out the succession of messages for simultaneous review during the planning stage can help in improving their effectiveness. By seeing these in sequence, the pattern of the desired conversation with potential participants is clear and the timing of the message sequence can be optimized. However, it should be noted that with regard to recruitment materials, the lead time required for review of the items is substantial if there is to be a real opportunity for major revision and re-review prior to submission of the package to OMB.

Monitoring and analyzing response rates should be an ongoing formalized process throughout the data collection process. For some data collections analysis is on-going. Even though paradigms may need to differ among kinds of studies, a set of standards and templates for real-time analysis are needed that can be universally applied. Timely comparison of responses at each stage with the anticipated response rates allows administrators to analyze quickly enough to introduce modifications to the survey as required. NCES already builds in several opportunities for changes to the sampling plan once the survey is in the field.

Sharing an Integrated Approach and Effective Practices

Problems cited in this report and opportunities for improvement are for the most part not unknown at NCES. However, this knowledge is not concentrated in any one or more individuals - as became evident in the course of NCES staff presentations to the panel. Neither is there one methodologist dedicated to development and monitoring of recruitment materials separately from any other task. Some of this is due to turnover and/or reassignment of NCES personnel; some of this is due to lack of a natural occasion for sharing specific information since surveys are at very different stages of completion at any one point in time.

Nonetheless, there is considerable NCES experience to draw on. Examples could be shared throughout NCES of NAEP materials and/or principles of materials development that came from a NAEP field publications working group charged with revising NAEP recruitment materials. A focus group report that investigated parents' responses to letters requesting permission for students to participate could be part of some kind of NCES archive that should be drawn upon when creating and reviewing materials. A graph presenting the cumulative response rate by day, week, wave or stage of data collection that is used in one survey could be a template for all NCES surveys. Internal sharing should be strongly encouraged.

External resources also could be tapped, especially with regard to problems and solutions that are particular to federal data gathering. NCES regularly participates in the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (FCSM), an inter-agency committee dedicated to improving the quality of federal statistics. While the agenda of the FCSM may address other issues, this provides an excellent opportunity to share experiences with leadership of other statistical agencies.

IV. EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATIONS

Thoughtful innovation is going to be key to the success in NCES recruitment, especially recruitment messaging as communication increasingly takes advantage of electronic modes. At the same time that innovation needs to move rapidly, it must be driven by clear rationales and documented expectations for the results. Efficient experimentation is essential.

Experimentation Program

Which ideas are worth an experiment? The answer is to balance the expected or even potential gains from the innovations against the cost in time and resources (sample size!) of the experiment.

The first source to examine is the information from previous survey and/or related surveys. Analyzing the incremental response rate with each succeeding communication can shed light both on the effectiveness of each specific item in the series of contact materials and also indicate the relative effectiveness of the item for specific subpopulations. This defines a problem to attack; the second step is to identify possible solutions. So, the second source to examine is the research literature on effectiveness of different recruitment approaches, for example in reaching specific subpopulations, and relevant experience of other survey efforts including federal statistical surveys. Creating new materials depends on both the attributes of the current material and the reasons for its relative success or failure. Brainstorming may produce an additional set of possible changes.

Large-scale, probability-based experiments are valuable, but costly and time-consuming. Time for adequate testing – and consequent revision of materials – needs to be built into the timeline for survey planning and development. Therefore, these large-scale experiments are justifiable only when there is expectation of documenting real, substantial gains.

The role of small preliminary experiments, for example with 9 or fewer subjects or as small focus groups from targeted subpopulations, is important in investigating and screening multiple ideas rapidly to identify the most promising. These smaller investments allow early looks at dramatic changes with potential for sizeable rather than incremental gains. Such experiments will not require probability samples since the focus will be on directional results that are sufficiently robust with respect to sample quality to lead to hypotheses for subsequent testing or confirmation.

Once several possible modifications or changes have been identified, for example including changes to several interconnected parts of a messaging system, a full-blown probability-based experiment of the “best package” of changes can test the changes simultaneously. If these changes collectively fail to produce substantial improvement in response, NCES can move on to the next set of ideas. If these changes do produce improved response, analysis and/or further studies can be undertaken to isolate the effects of specific changes. However, the primary objective is to find a package that works well. This approach to experiment design is effective because it allows more adventurous modifications, it treats the system holistically, and therefore accelerates innovation.

V. REACHING THE TARGET POPULATION

Motivation

Even before the envelope arrives, the various target populations have different predispositions to respond and to participate. At all levels, subpopulations are varied in their enthusiasm for participation, whether decision-makers or superintendents (co-operative or uncooperative, long-time or new to the job) or demographically and culturally distinct subpopulations of parents. An accurate understanding of what motivates response from each specific target population should direct the design of materials.

Motivation to participate in a survey depends on both interest and trust; for NCES voluntary surveys and studies gaining both of these is crucial.

Cognitive interviews and focus groups, especially with the hard-to-reach populations, can elicit information about how these recipients are processing the recruiting materials and how the materials can be designed specifically to be effective in these settings.

For culturally-defined subpopulations, gaining trust may require endorsement of community leaders. NAEP has been effective in reaching such populations through the NAEP state coordinators. These coordinators are positioned to work with state and district level education administrators and school level leaders to facilitate NAEP assessments. The collection of voluntary NCES studies and surveys have even a greater need for a similar role to be filled to also be able to interact with community leaders and have the opportunity to build bridges to engage the interest of hard-to-reach communities.

Language

For target populations not predisposed to respond, language – both tone and vocabulary – is doubly important. In contrast to a cordial conversation, an opening paragraph of “the government speaking” or a peppering of the text with unfamiliar acronyms are strong deterrents, as these define the relationship between writer and recipient as “inner circle” and “outsider,” respectively.

More than Printed Materials

In its current form, the NCES/IES, Department of Education website is a missed opportunity for NCES surveys. The unrealized potential of the website includes inviting engagement by directly addressing people at every level in the sequence of permission-givers - from advertisements in advance, to descriptions of what will be learned, to snippets related to ongoing surveys and subsequently to results (similar to the Data Points now posted and directed toward participants). Further, the website, integrated via links on printed and/or email materials, could provide more information (not just FAQs) specifically for and from the perspective of decision-makers, educators, parents. Thus, the website has potential to promote surveys, to provide news in an ongoing fashion and to solicit and report feedback.

Ideally, direct links to NCES webpages and specifically to surveys would appear on the Department or IES home page. The NCES home page could then have separate links or menus for the decision-makers, educators and participants to information or features written for their particular interest in appropriate language and style, whether conversational, technical or formal.

VI. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Putting Things into Place

Even with more extensive resources than NCES has available, rethinking and revising the messaging system would require setting priorities. Immediate tasks include putting into place – for all surveys at whatever stage – a uniform process for contractors to monitor and analyze the effectiveness of each step of the recruiting process. This information will be the basis for identifying the connections between steps in recruitment and for deciding where future change is most important.

Treating this challenge as Center-wide and sharing among staff can include taking advantage of NAEP experience. However, NCES is at a disadvantage without experts on messaging systems on NCES staff to take charge or and/or oversee the development of a holistic system. High level expertise to support this rethinking will be crucial and invaluable.

Forward Thinking – Challenges for Now

Since the lead time required for planning a survey is typically 2-4 years, the challenge at the beginning of 2018 is to prepare for surveys and assessments in 2020 – 2022. With the speed at which the public and organizations are shifting to electronic communication, planning today must envision future mechanisms of contact and response to be effective when the survey goes into the field. A challenge indeed! Issues to address today revolve around modes of contact and of response for surveys now in the planning phase, around the presentation of information about opportunities to participate and about results, and around the website and agile electronic communications. Other agencies are turning to web-based surveys with only back-up contacts via mail; so far NCES is relying on paper. One huge advantage of a web-push survey is combining of screening and immediate request for completion of an online survey.

VII. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Each of the previous sections of this report provides details of the panel’s findings and the rationale for each issue identified for further consideration by NCES. The degree of immediacy for the resulting recommendations varies: some deserve prompt consideration and others will require time to address. The primary recommendations are followed by a list of more specific supporting recommendations.

In addition to the specific findings and the recommendations below, the panel notes with concern that NCES faces a structural conundrum in regard to the development of recruitment strategies and materials. For each study or survey, NCES staff confront the issues critical to development of an effective strategy. But the studies are not in synchrony. So, at any point in time, various NCES staff are grappling with the crucial issues at different stages of survey development, implementation, and data assembly for their respective surveys. Hence no time is natural for sharing knowledge among staff about a particular stage. Secondly, the technical expertise to continue to assure best practices is limited if present. Consequently, while contractors do possess this expertise, a conflict of interest may develop when the investment required for innovation may or may not be in the contractor’s own interest. The panel notes that NCES leadership is well aware of this issue and has actively encouraged innovation as well as adherence to standards and best practices.

Primary Recommendations

1. Recruitment should be planned holistically with coherent elements integrated into a process that can be monitored and managed in real time.
2. Recruitment strategies and materials should be developed to communicate effectively with the specific target population(s), based on understanding what motivates response from that population.
3. Language should be direct and clear, written specifically for the target audience (i.e., not a redact of language suitable for OMB); and text should be limited to the essential communication with required caveats and government terms separated and deferred to follow the essential communication.
4. NCES should take ownership of the recruitment process design, materials development, monitoring and analysis of effectiveness whether work is done in-house or is delegated to a contractor.

Specific Recommendations

1. In development, shift attention given to individual items to the full sequence of materials, the context, and the role of each item in that context. Make strategic decisions about modes of contact and modes of response.
2. Once in implementation phase monitor data collection assiduously to assess efficacy of the messaging campaign and make adjustments if needed. Focus on recipients opening the materials and acting on them.
3. Engage professional expertise (within NCES and/or from contractor) in materials development, testing and monitoring. Allow time for adequate testing and consequent revision of materials.
4. Language throughout all text (materials and website information) must be intelligible, i.e., in plain and compelling language, for the target population; and actions to be taken should be immediately clear.
5. NCES studies should prominently indicate NCES (or National Center for Education Statistics) on all materials and also should make direct links to the NCES website prominent. This branding should be universal for all NCES studies and surveys; specifically, this should include NAEP.
6. Standards and expectations for new recruitment materials need to be spelled out both for NCES staff and for contractors (included in the RFP), especially to avoid recycling materials which may have been developed from a different communication or for a different mode of contact.
7. Website additions – e.g., a link “Are you participating in an NCES study or assessment?” – could connect participants, parents, administrators with useful information and detail (not just FAQs) about each NCES study.
8. Reaching “difficult-to-engage populations,” especially those defined in cultural or other demographic terms, constitutes a specific problem to address, where building trust is often a prerequisite. *The panel strongly supports involvement of local coordinators to improve response rates within these communities.*
9. Experimentation in the broadest sense, from preliminary small-scale exploration of ideas to large-scale probability studies, is strongly encouraged. Small experiments and focus groups are suited to exploring ideas. However, large-scale probability-based experiments should be reserved for testing a new strategy or package of innovations with potentially major impact on response. One-at-a-time testing of small changes is discouraged.

10. Looking forward is essential because of the necessary lead time for a study or survey. Particular attention is warranted now for future decisions about modes of contact and response, as well as to adaptations during implementation.
11. Internal sharing at NCES should be facilitated, since NCES staff managing surveys and assessments, including NAEP, collectively already have substantial knowledge of results from focus groups, experiments, and data monitoring methods.

APPENDIX

1. Agenda
2. Expert Panel Biosketches

NCES EXPERT PANEL
NCES STUDY AND SURVEY RECRUITMENT PLANNING AND MATERIALS
January 4-5, 2018
PCP Building, Room 4090

AGENDA

Thursday, January 4th

8:30 am	Arrival and Building Security
9:00 am - 12:00 pm	Welcome Introductions
each	Selected NCES Survey Staff Presentations/Clarifications of Recruitment Processes with the Panel.* *Items to cover: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is the timing and role of each piece of recruitment material?2. How do the materials fit together in the recruitment process?3. What are the delivery mode(s) and the mode(s) of response for piece?4. Is the recruitment process working or not?5. Are there any study results?
12:00 pm - 1:00 pm	Lunch (on your own)
1:00 pm - 4:30 pm	Panel Executive Session
4:30 pm - 5:00pm	Clarification Requests of NCES from the Panel
5:00 pm	Adjourn

Friday, January 5th

8:30 am	Arrival and Building Security
9:00 am - Noon	Panel Executive Working Session
Noon - 1:00 pm	Panel Executive Discussion and Working Lunch Together (at local cafeteria)
1:00 pm -2:30 pm	Panel Executive Working Session
2:30 pm - 3:00 pm	Panel Feedback to NCES
3:00 pm	Adjourn

EXPERT PANEL MEMBERS' BIOSKETCHES

Edward Blair, Ph.D., University of Illinois

Title: Michael J. Cemo Professor of Marketing & Entrepreneurship; Chair of the Department of Marketing & Entrepreneurship, C. T. Bauer College of Business, University of Houston

Edward Blair is the Michael J. Cemo Professor of Marketing & Entrepreneurship and Chair of the Department of Marketing & Entrepreneurship in the C. T. Bauer College of Business, University of Houston. He has served as chair of the ASA Committee on Energy Statistics, which advises the U.S. Energy Information Administration on statistical matters, as a member of the U.S. Census Bureau Advisory Committee, and as an NSF panelist in Innovation and Organizational Change.

He is author or co-author of numerous books and journal articles, including *Applied Survey Sampling* (Sage Publications, 2015) and *Designing Surveys, 3e* (Sage Publications, 2014). He has served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, and *Journal of Business Research*, as national conference chair for the American Marketing Association, and as Vice-President of the Journal of Consumer Research Policy Board.

Don A. Dillman, Ph.D., Iowa State University

Title: Regents professor, Department of Sociology; Deputy Director for Research and Development, Social and Economic Sciences Research Center, Washington State University

Don A. Dillman is Regents professor in the Department of Sociology at Washington State University and Deputy Director for Research and Development in the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University. Previously, he served as senior survey methodologist in the office of the director at the U.S. Census Bureau. He is recognized internationally as a major contributor to the development of modern mail, telephone, and internet survey methods. In 2000, he received the Roger Herriot Award for Innovation in Federal Statistics for his work at the Census Bureau on creating new methods for the 2000 Decennial Census. He is an elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Statistical Association, and served as past president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and the Rural Sociological Society, and now serves as a member of the National Academies Committee on National Statistics. He has a Ph.D. in sociology from Iowa State University and has authored nearly 280 books and articles including *Internet, Phone Mail and Mixed-Mode Surveys; The Tailored Design Method, 4th edition* (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). In 2017 he and his research team received the AAPOR Warren J. Mitofsky Innovator's Award for the development of web-push data collection methods now being used in many countries throughout the world.

Rachel Horwitz, Ph.D., University of Maryland

Title: Survey Methodologist, U.S. Census Bureau

Rachel Horwitz has been a survey methodologist at the U.S. Census Bureau since 2004. She has worked in the Economic, Decennial, and Demographic directorates and her work has focused on reducing measurement and nonresponse error. She has used paradata (including breakoff rates, answer changes, mouse clicks, and mouse movements) to make usability and cognitive improvements to various web surveys, including the American Community Survey. She has also examined methods to optimize the number and type of contacts to sample cases to reduce respondent burden and cost while maintaining or improving response rates. She received her MS and PhD in Survey Methodology from the University of Maryland.

Jennifer Godinez

Title: Associate Director, Minnesota Education Equity Partnership (MnEEP)

Jennifer Godinez has been the lead director of the “Race Equity and Excellence in Education Network” (REEEN) initiative at the Minnesota Education Equity Partnership (MnEEP) since 2011. REEEN works to build collective action teams to address race equity in education in Minnesota. As MnEEP Associate Director, along with MnEEP collaborative partners, Jennifer also co-leads the development a race equity in policy brief series and advised the organization’s major strategic planning process with the goal of shaping education equity and excellence transformation in Minnesota. Her chapter writings on race equity and teacher effectiveness have been published by Stylus Publishing, her articles have appeared in school board and college access journals, and she has been a keynote speaker for several major Minnesota education association meetings. Jennifer is considered an education equity thought leader having advised several key education equity initiatives in the Twin Cities region.

Jennifer has a strong reputation as a social entrepreneur who has built strong links between community networks and public policy. As the founding director of the Minnesota College Access Network at MnEEP, from 2006 to 2009, she led advisors and staff in building the foundation of a network of programs and efforts that support community-based, multicultural college access services and social marketing messaging state-wide. Since 2012, she has been the lead race equity strategist developing a model Race Equity and Excellence in Education Action Plan and Promise to Act committee guiding this work in the Mille Lacs region with 3 school districts, leveraging resources and providing a focus on American Indian student achievement and equity in schooling. Since 2015, she has advised a community advisory team in Nobles County for the development of a Race Equity Action Plan in that community, attracting a competitive Bush Innovation Grant Fund for this community-centered planning approach. Her thought leadership on equity and prosperity has been featured in the Star Tribune and she has been a guest on MPR and the NewsHour on PBS discussing education equity and the emerging workforce.

Kristen Olson, Ph.D., University of Michigan

Title: Leland J. and Dorothy H. Olson Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Kristen Olson is Leland J. and Dorothy H. Olson Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research includes examining interviewer effects, paradata, the intersection of nonresponse and measurement errors, within-household selection in self-administered surveys, and questionnaire design. Her research has appeared in journals including Public Opinion Quarterly, the Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A, Sociological Methods and Research, Social Science Research, the Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology, the Journal of Official Statistics, and Field Methods, among others. Dr. Olson was Principal Investigator on the Nebraska node for the NSF-Census research network, and has been coinvestigator on two NIH grants to study mental health among homeless women and homeless youth. She teaches courses on applied sampling, analysis of complex survey data, total survey error, nonresponse bias analyses, and linear regression. Dr. Olson has a B.A. degree in mathematical methods in the social sciences and sociology from Northwestern University, an M.S. degree in survey methodology from the Joint Program in Survey Methodology at the University of Maryland, College Park, and a Ph.D. in survey methodology from the University of Michigan.

Darby Steiger, M.A., M.P.P., University of Michigan

Title: Senior Survey Methodologist, Westat

Darby Steiger is a senior survey methodologist with more than 20 years of experience designing, conducting, analyzing, and presenting social science research and market research for government agencies, non-profits, associations, and corporate clients. She specializes in designing and redesigning complex federal surveys to help improve response rates and data quality in today's evolving survey environment. Ms. Steiger also trains researchers in cognitive interviewing and focus group moderating techniques. She is passionate about, and highly experienced in, designing new ways to measure the public's opinion in order to impact policy, improve performance, and promote actionable understanding.

Panel convened by National Institute of Statistical Sciences

Nell Sedransk, Ph.D., Iowa State University

Title: Director, National Institute of Statistical Sciences; Statistics Professor, North Carolina State University

Dr. Nell Sedransk is the Director of the National Institute of Statistical Sciences and Professor of Statistics at North Carolina State University. She is an Elected Member of the International Statistical Institute, also Elected Fellow of the American Statistical Association. She is coauthor of three technical books; and her research in both statistical theory and application appears in more than 60 scientific papers in refereed journals. The areas of her technical expertise include: design of complex experiments, Bayesian inference, spatial statistics and topological foundations for statistical theory. She has applied her expertise in statistical design and analysis of complex experiments and observational studies to a wide range of applications from physiology and medicine to engineering and sensors to social science applications in multi-observer scoring to ethical designs for clinical trials.