

Effective Strategies for Surveying Community College Students: Lessons From a Four-Wave Study

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The analysis of administrative data has enabled major advances in understanding postsecondary outcomes, yet it provides limited insight into the mechanisms that shape student decision-making, including students' expectations, preferences, and experiences. Surveys are therefore a critical complement, particularly in capturing how students interpret and respond to their academic environments. The use of self-administered web surveys has expanded rapidly in education research due to its speed and relatively low cost (Holtom et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2022). However, these surveys present substantial challenges for recruitment and retention, particularly in longitudinal designs, which can lead to low response rates. While researchers may employ a wide range of recruitment methods—including email, text messaging, incentives, and in-person contact—it is hard to know what strategies are best under what circumstances and for which populations, and how to balance considerations of time, cost, and effort against anticipated response rates. Further, there is little research on effective recruitment strategies specific to community college students, who represent a broad spectrum of ages, life experiences, and familiarity with college norms (Betancourt & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2019).

One challenge in recruiting students to participate in surveys is that students' communication preferences frequently shift, forcing colleges to quickly adapt. For example, many students now prefer text messaging and other real-time platforms to email (Swanson et al., 2020). Even when students regularly check their college email, they may ignore messages that do not appear directly relevant to them or that come from unfamiliar senders (Simpson et al., 2024). As a result, researchers must find ways to break through crowded communication channels and motivate participation.

In this report, we describe what we learned from conducting a four-wave longitudinal survey over three academic years with more than 4,500 first-time community college students at four institutions in California, Ohio, Maryland, and Texas. By implementing a broad range of recruitment strategies—including classroom visits, emails, text messages, phone calls, thank you notes, prepayments, and tokens of appreciation—we achieved a 36% response rate in Wave 1 and maintained high response rates among these initial respondents in subsequent waves, with 61% participation in Wave 2, 64% in Wave 3, and 58% in Wave 4. There are few comparable benchmarks for longitudinal surveys that follow first-time community college students across

multiple years. The Survey of Entering Student Engagement reported an average response rate of 42% for its 2019 in-class administration and 11.5% for its 2020 online administration (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2021). A broader meta-analysis of 1,071 online surveys in education-related research found an average response rate of 44% (Wu et al., 2022). Because these studies differ from ours in their populations, administration modes, incentives, and timing, these findings provide useful context for our Wave 1 response rate but not for participation in subsequent waves.

What we share in this report comes from our analysis of response rates in reaction to different recruitment methods, randomized experiments of selected strategies, our observations during campus visits in which we administered the survey, and interviews with students who participated in more than one wave of the survey. Because many strategies were used in combination and only some were experimentally tested, we present the findings as practical lessons rather than definitive evidence about what will work in every setting. We close with recommendations for researchers surveying community college students and for institutional researchers based in community colleges.

About Our Study and Survey

The survey we describe in this report is part of a longitudinal study to understand community college students' program and career decision-making process. Using the survey, combined with administrative data and interviews with faculty, staff, and students, we examined how new community college students think about programs of study and careers (Lahr et al., 2025); how certain incoming students are about their program choices and how their choices often change over time (Klempin, Aguilar Padilla, et al., 2025); how faculty and staff support students' decision-making process (Klempin, Fay, et al., 2025); and how students' beliefs and preferences about programs evolve over the course of their first year in college (Minaya et al., forthcoming).

The first three waves of the survey, which were administered during students' first three terms in college (fall 2023, spring 2024, and fall 2024), focused on three topics: (1) students' educational and career goals; (2) students' current thoughts on the program(s) they intend to pursue and the factors that are most important to them when selecting a program; and (3) the people and experiences inside and outside the college that are informing the student's program choice(s). We also included a series of demographic questions to better understand each student's financial, career, and familial contexts.

Waves 3 and 4 also included some different survey questions for students who were no longer enrolled at their original college or at any college. Wave 3 (fall 2024) included a set of questions about why they left their original college (see Aguilar Padilla et al., 2025), and Wave 4 (spring 2026) included questions about students' transfer experiences and their transition from college to the workforce. All four waves of the survey included a combination of common as well as college-specific content, including customized lists of programs of study and campus resources.

Survey Sample and Administration

CCRC and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan partnered to administer the survey to all 12,628 first-time-in-college students enrolled at four community colleges in California, Ohio, Maryland, and Texas in fall 2023. Students who completed the first wave of the survey in fall 2023 were then invited to complete the survey again in the spring 2024, fall 2024, and spring 2026 terms. The colleges in our sample include one urban, two suburban, and one rural college; two colleges are Hispanic-Serving Institutions and one is a Predominantly Black Institution.

The survey was administered in Qualtrics, optimized to be easily completed on a computer, tablet, or cell phone, and designed to be completed in 20 minutes. We had the full survey professionally translated into Spanish, and students could choose to respond to questions in either Spanish or English.

Survey Response Rates

Table 1 shows the response rates for Wave 1 by college, which varied between 30% and 46%. From self-reported demographic data in the survey, we know that 59% of respondents were female, and 40% reported that they were the first in their family to attend college. Students could select more than one race/ethnicity category; the sample was 54% Hispanic, 31% White, 24% Black, 8% Native American, and 5% Asian.

Table 1. Wave 1 Sample and Response Rate by College

Site	Fall 2023 enrollment	Wave 1 survey completers	Wave 1 response rate
College 1	1,773	687	39%
College 2	1,368	517	38%
College 3	2,742	1,273	46%
College 4	6,824	2,038	30%
Total	12,628	4,515	36%

The 4,515 students who completed the first wave were invited to participate in subsequent waves of the survey (see Figure 1). A total of 2,774 students completed Wave 2 of the survey for an overall response rate of 61%; 2,834 students completed Wave 3 in fall 2024 for an overall response rate of 64%. 2,595 students completed Wave 4 in spring 2026. Table 2 shows response rates by college.

Figure 1. Overall Response Rates Through Four Waves

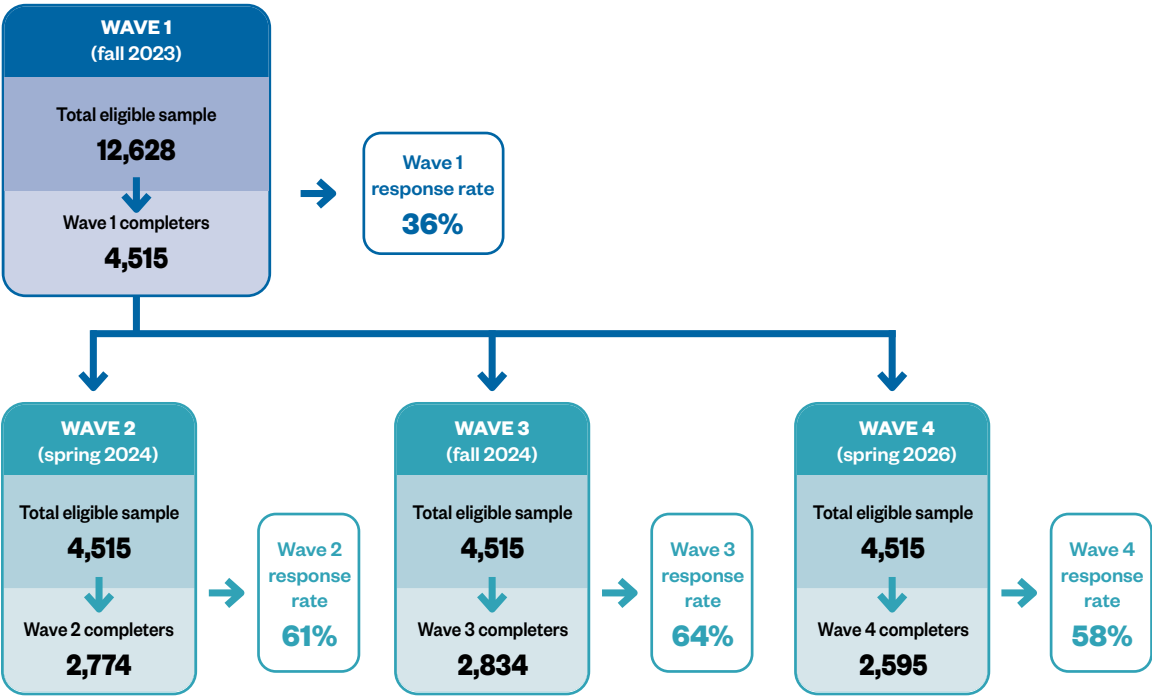


Table 2. Waves 2–4 Response Rates by College

Site	Wave 2		Wave 3		Wave 4	
	Completers	Response rate	Completers	Response rate	Completers	Response rate
College 1	458	67%	457	67%	413	60%
College 2	293	57%	301	58%	276	53%
College 3	830	65%	850	67%	748	59%
College 4	1,193	59%	1,226	60%	1,158	57%
Total	2,774	61%	2,834	63%	2,595	58%

Survey Recruitment Strategies

Across the four waves of the survey, we employed multiple recruitment strategies, summarized in Table 3. Some of the strategies were implemented as randomized experiments, while others were implemented as part of the overall survey administration approach. In discussing the strategies, we distinguish between experimental evidence, descriptive response patterns, and implementation lessons where relevant.

Table 3. Summary of Recruitment Strategies by Wave

Strategy	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
Campus visits	198 classes ^a	Yes, but fewer classroom visits	–	–
Emails ^b	9 emails	11 emails	8 emails	6 emails
Tokens of appreciation	\$25	\$40	\$40	\$50
Reminder phone calls ^b	–	3 calls	6 calls	2 calls
Text messages	1 text	3 texts	3 texts	3 texts
Project branding	–	Yes	Yes	Yes
Thank you notes with \$5 prepayment	–	Yes	Yes	Yes

^a 186 in-person classes and 12 online classes.

^b Email row results show the number of emails sent to each student. Students were no longer emailed after they completed the survey, so these numbers represent the maximum number of emails a student could have received. The same is true for phone calls and text messages.

Strategy 1: Classroom Visits for In-Person Survey Administration

To help meet our response rate goals for the first wave of the study, our research team conducted three-day site visits to each college on dates that corresponded to when the survey opened at that college.¹ We visited each institution within the first two or three weeks of the start of the fall term to ensure that we were capturing students' earliest thinking about their program and career choices. In total, we visited 186 in-person classes across the four colleges. One college also offered an online (synchronous) first-year student success course, and we joined 12 of these classes via Zoom. Between classroom visits, we set up a table in high-traffic areas of the campus (e.g., the cafeteria or student center), and we offered snacks and pizza to recruit additional survey participants.

To determine which classes to visit, we worked with each college's institutional research office to identify classes and course sections that enrolled large numbers of first-time-in-college students. The majority of the classes we visited were typical first-year courses, including English Composition, Introduction to Psychology, Introduction to Business, American Government and Politics, and student success courses. We also visited a number of first-year career-technical courses, including a first-year emergency medical technician course, Anatomy and Physiology, and computer applications courses. We contacted the faculty in identified classes to request permission to visit their class for 30 minutes at either the beginning or the end of their class period to introduce the survey and give students time to complete it in class. For those classes where we received permission to visit, the research team spent 5 minutes introducing ourselves and the study, explaining the informed consent process, and then helping the students find the survey in either their college or personal email. The students then had 20–25 minutes to complete the survey.

To estimate the impact of our visits on response rates, we included a question on the survey that asked, “Are you taking this survey in class at your college?” Our subsequent analysis, however, revealed that this question did not accurately capture students’ location when they were taking the survey. There were two main sources of error. First, it did not identify students who took the survey due to our presence on campus but did not take it in a class we visited (e.g., a student who we informed about the survey when we were tabling in high-traffic areas). Second, it falsely identified students who took the survey during a class that we did not attend.

While not perfect, we were able to use students’ responses to this question, in conjunction with data about when the students took the survey and a schedule of when we visited classes, to infer which students took the survey in classes that we visited. Conservatively, we estimate that about a quarter of respondents in the Wave 1 took the survey in a class that we visited in fall 2023. In summer 2025, we conducted interviews with 43 students who had taken more than one wave of the survey. One of the questions we asked these students was how they first heard about the study. Seventeen of these students (40% of those interviewed) said that they first heard about the study during our in-class visits.

Our analysis of where students took the survey revealed a few differences between respondents who completed the survey in class and those who completed it outside of class. In-class survey takers were more male (41%) than non-in-class takers (35%), though female respondents remained the majority across both groups. A higher proportion of Hispanic students (56%) appeared among in-class survey takers, while first-generation representation was the same between the two groups (at 40%). A larger share of White students (17% compared to 13% of non-in-class takers) and working students (65% compared to 59% of non-in-class takers) were also among those identified as in-class respondents. In contrast, a higher share of Black students initiated the survey outside of our class visits (21% compared to 15% of in-class respondents). It is important to note that the racial/ethnic composition of student respondents is correlated with college characteristics in our sample, which includes two Hispanic-Serving Institutions and one Predominantly Black Institution.

In-person outreach appears especially valuable for increasing response rates and improving initial representativeness in single-wave surveys, while lower-touch, scalable modes such as email and text messaging (discussed below) may be more feasible for sustaining engagement in longitudinal designs.

Strategy 2: Invitation Emails to Potential Respondents

Across the four waves of the survey, emailing potential student respondents was our primary recruitment strategy. In Wave 1 we sent 9 mails, in Wave 2 we sent 11, in Wave 3 we sent 8, and in Wave 4 we sent 6 emails. All emails had slightly different subject lines, and the body text of the emails varied slightly to highlight different motivations for participation. With the exception of one college that did not provide students’ personal email addresses for the first wave, all emails had personalized greetings, were sent both to students’ college and to students’ personal email addresses, included a link to the survey itself, and reminded students about the token of appreciation they would receive for completing the survey.

In Wave 1, we had a very high response rate by email because we sent only one text message (see Strategy 5 below) and because when students took the survey in class, they were using the link in their email. By Wave 2, however, students were able to take the survey through different

channels, including email, text, and QR code in the thank you notes. By analyzing the link source, we could see that across Waves 2 and 3, when we utilized multiple contact strategies, most students still accessed the survey via the link in the email. In Wave 4, we found that nearly half of respondents were still taking the survey via email, though that was a slightly lower percentage than in previous waves.

Table 4. Survey Completers via Email

Site	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
College 1	90%	54%	63%	45%
College 2	95%	54%	53%	54%
College 3	94%	62%	57%	46%
College 4	86%	82% ^a	54%	45%

^a College 4 had higher email response rates in Wave 2 because fewer students responded via the QR code on the thank you notes we sent, which we explain below in Strategy 7.

In Wave 2 we conducted an experiment to compare the effects of five different email messages on participant engagement. We were interested in whether students would be more or less motivated to engage with the survey depending on the subject line of the email. Because we were in the middle of conducting a longitudinal study, we hoped that the results of this experiment would provide us with guidance on how to best engage respondents in subsequent waves of the study.

Respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of five invitation subject-line conditions, each of which emphasized a different reason a student might want to complete the survey. The five conditions were (1) financial gain, (2) interest in academics, (3) interest in careers, (4) prosocial contribution, and (5) representation. The main difference in the email was the subject line; the text of the email was virtually constant across messages. The full subject lines are included in Table 5.

Table 5. Subject Lines of Emails in Wave 2

Condition	Email subject line
Financial gain	Paid Survey About Your College Experiences and Career Choices
Interest in academics	Survey About Your College Experiences
Interest in careers	Survey About Your Career Choices
Prosocial contribution	Help Us Understand Your College and Career Choices
Representation	We Need to Hear from Students Like You

Table 6 (next page) shows response patterns by the email subject-line condition to which students were initially assigned. We found that the financial motivation message was most impactful initially, resulting in a 15-percentage-point higher response rate after the first communication than for those in the “representation” group (the email with the lowest response rate). Over the course of the Wave 2 survey administration, respondents received emails that included all the different subject lines, and the differences between the groups’ response rates narrowed; however, the “financial gain” initial group still maintained a slight edge by the time we closed the survey, followed closely by the “interest in academics” initial group (see Figure 2). Because students later received emails using multiple subject lines, the difference after the first email provides the cleanest comparison across randomly assigned message conditions; the end-of-wave differences should be interpreted as cumulative response patterns after subsequent outreach overlapped across groups.

Figure 2. Wave 2 Cumulative Completion Rates by Initial Email Subject Line

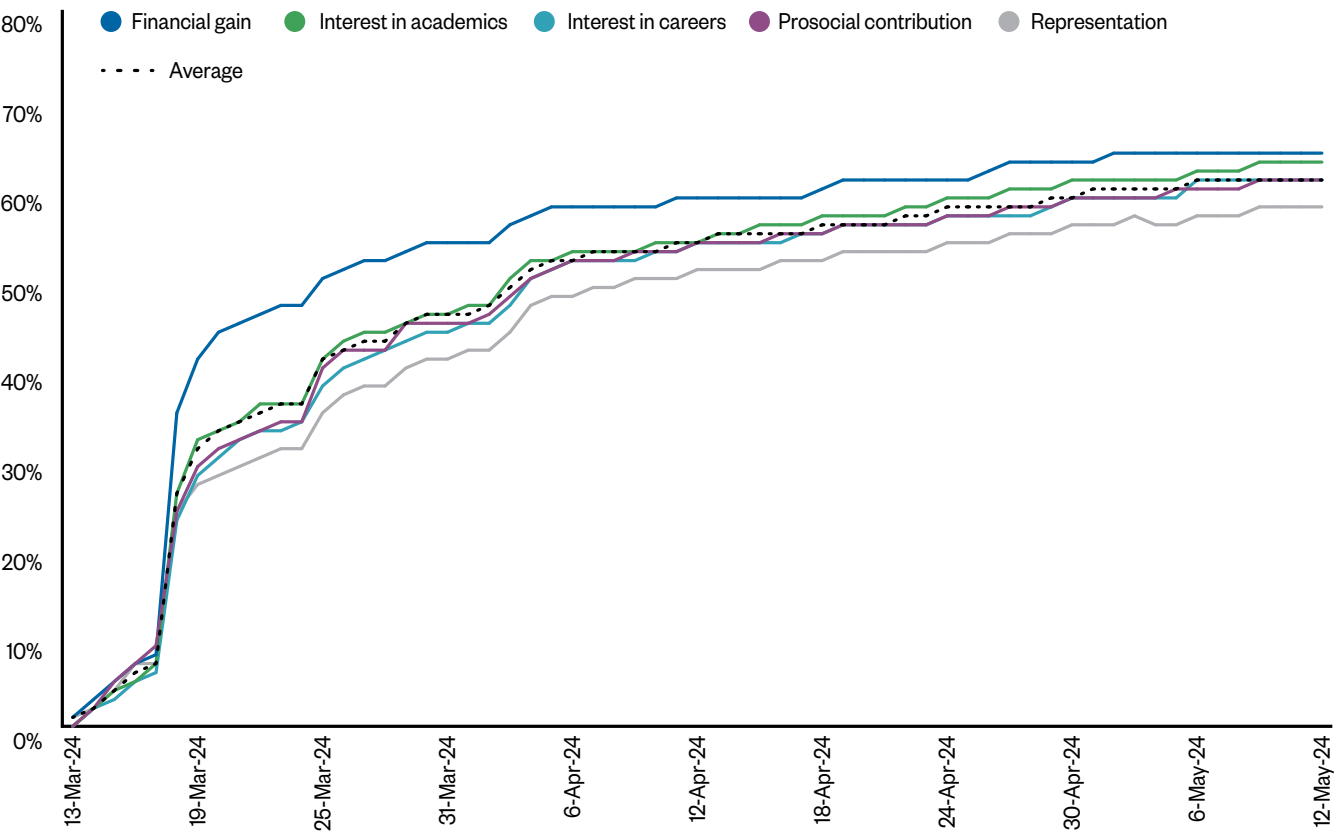


Table 6. Wave 2 Response Rate by Initial Email Subject Line

Subject-line condition	Emails sent	Before second email		By end of Wave 2	
		Completers	Response rate	Completers	Response rate
Financial gain	767	321	38%	540	64%
Interest in academics	838	262	29%	572	63%
Interest in careers	874	254	27%	570	61%
Prosocial contribution	827	228	25%	553	61%
Representation	859	217	23%	539	58%
Total	4,165	1,282	28%	2,774	61%

Note. Completers include those who used any link to complete the survey, not just emailed links.

When asked about their preferred method of contact in interviews, nearly all students in the summer 2025 interview group cited email (39 students, or 93%). Furthermore, email was the most frequently mentioned method when students were asked how they first heard about the study (28 students, or 67%). Of the students who specified a preference between being contacted through personal or college emails, nine preferred receiving communications via their personal email, while four preferred their college email.

In addition to asking about their preferred method of contact, we also inquired about students' reasons for participating in the study. In support of the findings from the email messaging experiment, nearly half of those interviewed (45%) said that they participated because of the financial incentives.² At the same time, many students were motivated by the opportunity to share their perspective (14 students, or 33%) and to contribute to research (13 students, or 31%). Additionally, about a quarter of interviewees (10 students, or 24%) thought that the topic of the survey was interesting and enjoyed answering the questions. For other students, taking the survey was viewed as an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in choosing a program and career (6 students, or 14%). And some interviewees said they completed the survey because it was easy to do (6 students, or 14%).

Although email is the easiest method of contacting potential respondents from a researcher's perspective and is clearly preferred by students in our study, we learned several lessons about relying on email for recruitment purposes. Emails from outside-the-college senders can easily get caught in spam filters, even after whitelisting, as colleges often employ restrictive filters for external emails due to increasing phishing attacks. Ahead of distributing our survey, we asked the colleges' IT departments to whitelist the email address from which the survey would be sent; however, two months later, the spam filter at one college began filtering out our emails, which we only realized when we were on campus while this was happening and spoke with students about it.

A second challenge with email that we observed in Wave 1 when administering the survey in person was that many new students are unfamiliar with how to access their college portal or check their college email, suggesting that including personal email addresses is beneficial, especially for first-time-in-college students. Finally, to be effective, emails must be engaging

and stand out, as students receive a large volume of messages. Using catchy branding and emphasizing the financial benefits of taking the survey likely helps with recognizability in a crowded inbox. We discuss our survey branding (Strategy 6) below.

Strategy 3: Tokens of Appreciation for Survey Completers

While in-person recruitment of students and communication via email were critical for reaching potential respondents, providing a financial incentive was also an important component of our recruitment approach across all four waves. The tokens of appreciation were highly motivating, as nearly half of the students we interviewed (45%) cited the gift cards as the main reason that they participated in the study.

In Wave 1, we offered students a \$25 Visa e-gift card as a token of appreciation upon completion of the survey. In Waves 2 and 3 we increased the amount to \$40, and in Wave 4 we offered a \$50 token of appreciation. In the first wave, we experienced a few challenges with the disbursement of the gift cards, which prompted changes in subsequent survey waves. For example, the instructions from the company that distributed the electronic gift card were confusing, and as a result many respondents reached out with questions. Additionally, a number of respondents were not familiar with “business days.” Many interpreted business days as consecutive days and would email or call in to ask about the status of their gift cards.

As a result of the challenges with the Visa card, we provided students with three choices for their token of appreciation in Waves 2 and 3. Students could choose between receiving a Visa e-gift card (1–2 weeks to process), an Amazon gift card (3–5 days to process), or cash (2–3 weeks to process). Despite the challenges in the first wave and the length of time indicated for token delivery, 47% of students chose a Visa card, 28% chose cash, and 25% selected an Amazon card in the second wave. The distribution was similar in Wave 3.

Table 7. Students’ Choices of Tokens of Appreciation in Waves 2 and 3

Wave	Visa card	Cash	Amazon card
Wave 2	47%	28%	25%
Wave 3	45%	30%	25%

In Wave 4, we had the opportunity to use a new electronic gift card service, in which respondents can choose a gift card from one of hundreds of companies. This service offers an API that can be connected directly to Qualtrics, so that respondents receive payments immediately upon completion of the survey. The gift card service worked well, but it presented a few challenges. For example, if there was a typo in the respondents’ email address, then the gift card would be processed but not delivered. This required monitoring gift card sending statuses, correcting errors in email addresses that were obvious (e.g., “.con” instead of “.com”), resending the gift card, and/or reaching out to respondents for alternative email addresses. However, we did not receive any complaints about cashing the gift cards, which was an improvement from previous waves.

In addition to the tokens of appreciation, starting in Wave 2, we added an additional incentive—conducting a drawing for one of four iPads for students who completed the survey by a certain date. Although we did not test the effectiveness of this strategy, we observed an increase in responses on days that we did a last chance email for the drawing.

Strategy 4: Phone Calls to Nonrespondents

In the second wave, we included phone calls as a recruitment strategy to reach students in our sample who had not yet completed the survey after three emails. The phone calls were intended to remind students about the survey and to tell them how they could find the survey in their email; students did not complete the survey with the caller.

The reminder calls were made by callers hired and trained by the University of Michigan (U-M) Survey Research Center. Calls took place every day, including evenings and weekends, to maximize student availability. To assess the effectiveness of reminder calling (and to help us decide if we wanted to invest in calling in future waves), we conducted a randomized experiment. For the reminder calling experiment, 2,033 Wave 2 participants, 48% of the total sample, who (1) had consented to contact by phone and (2) had not completed the survey by Day 24 of data collection were stratified by college and randomly assigned to either receive up to three reminder calls ($n = 1,036$) or not to receive calls ($n = 997$). By the time calling began, students in our sample had been sent a thank you note with prepayment (see Strategy 7 below), three emails, and a text message. Reminder calling lasted 27 days, during which time all participants were sent four additional emails and a text message. After calling concluded, participants were sent three more emails and a final text message. When the survey closed, we observed a 10-percentage-point higher response rate (a 50% increase) among students who received the reminder calls compared to those who did not receive the calls.

Because of the impact of calling in Wave 2, we expanded calling to all students in Wave 3 who had not completed the survey two weeks after the survey opened. In total, callers made 1,758 calls over 34 days. Students continued to receive calls only if they still hadn't completed the survey, but they received no more than six calls in total. In the Wave 3 calling, the U-M callers received direct answers from 533 students and left messages for 826 students who did not answer. In Wave 4, we started calling two days after the initial email and text message. Our goal was to place only up to two calls per student to reduce potential annoyance and based on U-M's prior experience, which found that that additional calls have diminishing returns for survey completions. Overall, in Wave 4 we called 2,269 cases over 29 days. Of those called, 827 (36%) completed surveys.

While our Wave 2 experiment did show evidence of effectiveness, a few students (12%) of those interviewed noted that phone calls were not an effective mode of communication because they avoid calls from unknown numbers and assume that they are spam. For this reason, reminder callers were instructed to always leave a message.

Strategy 5: Text Messages

Across all four waves of the survey, we sent students text messages to remind them about the survey. In Wave 1, we sent one text message, and in Waves 2–4 we sent three. Each text message included a link to the survey so that students could complete the survey by phone.

In Wave 2, we found that 11% of respondents (ranging between 7% and 16% at particular colleges; see Table 8) completed the survey via a link they received through a text message. In Waves 3 and 4, between 31% and 43% of students at particular colleges completed the survey via text message link. The reason for this large increase in text message responses is likely because texts were sent before the thank you notes in Waves 3 and 4, whereas the notes were sent first in Wave 2. In Wave 3, we randomly assigned 1,709 students to receive either an email ($n = 851$) or a text message ($n = 858$) as their first communication. The next communication was sent a week later, giving students in both groups time to complete the survey from the initial link. Those who did not complete from the initial link were sent an email or text (whichever they did not yet receive) as the next communication. The text message received more responses initially, but by the end of the first week, the email group caught up to the text group. This suggests that text messages may accelerate early response, while the most motivated respondents (those who complete surveys early in data collection) may complete a survey regardless of whether the first link arrives by email or text.

Table 8. Survey Completers via Link in Text Message

Site	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
College 1	12%	31%	45%
College 2	10%	37%	34%
College 3	7%	35%	43%
College 4	16%	38%	43%

Strategy 6: Project Branding

As our team prepared for the second wave in spring 2024, we developed several strategies that we hoped would sustain participant engagement with our survey. We developed a project logo, which we included in a thank you note that we sent to all students who completed the first wave of the survey as well as in all email messages. For a longitudinal study, we thought that consistent and catchy branding across waves was important to break through the many emails that students receive (and we recommend doing this from the beginning of any longitudinal study). The initial branding included the study name, a graphic, and logos of the affiliated universities.

Figure 3. Initial Branding



For Wave 4, we updated the graphic to de-emphasize the college major, because we anticipated that many of the respondents would have completed or left college by then and would not be motivated by the college major emphasis. Instead of “My MAJOR is...,” the graphic said, “My PATH is...” We also added “and Careers” to the study name because the survey was revised to include a section on students’ college to career transition.

Figure 4. Updated Branding



Strategy 7: Thank You Notes and Prepayments

In Wave 2, we sent to all participants who completed the first wave of the survey a thank you note that included the newly designed logo on the front of the card, a link to the second wave (via QR code), statistics on how many students completed the first wave (in the thank you note in Wave 3, we noted how many students participated in Wave 2), a photo of the research team, and a \$5 prepayment in cash. We included the data point about the number of responses so that participants could see that they were part of a large number of students engaged in the survey; we included the researcher photo to show the people that are behind the project and to remind students who took the survey in class or saw the team on their campus who we are. The thank you notes were sent to all students with mailing addresses on file (about 4,000 students) one week prior to sending out the first email invitation for the next wave of the survey to all students. Across the colleges in Wave 2, 12% of students completed the survey using the QR code in the card. And in our interviews, when asked about the most useful form of contact, seven students (14%) mentioned the thank you note.

Figure 5. Thank You Note



Note. Front and inside of the thank you note sent to students in Wave 2. Similar notes with slightly different data points were sent in Waves 3 and 4.

In Wave 2, we observed that students from one college were not completing surveys by QR code, whereas many students were using the codes at other colleges. We inferred that the thank you notes were lost or stolen in the mail. However, that was all we could infer; we didn't know, for example, where they were lost. In Wave 4, therefore, we implemented a new tracking method for mail and found that about 96% of the notes were successfully delivered to their intended addresses.

Table 9. Survey Completers via QR Code in Thank You Note

Site	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
College 1	34%	5%	8%
College 2	35%	10%	9%
College 3	31%	7%	8%
College 4	1%	7%	10%

In Wave 4, when the project differentiated between engaged (completed Wave 3) and less engaged (did not complete Wave 3) respondents, we found that 24% of less engaged respondents who completed the Wave 4 survey did so using the QR code, compared to 6% of engaged respondents. This difference is partially explained by the fact that the engaged respondents completed the survey before having received the thank you note. However, the fact that 24% of the less engaged respondents completed by QR code suggests that this form of outreach may reach respondents not otherwise inclined to participate.

Survey Management and Administration

In each wave, the surveys in this study were programmed in Qualtrics and extensively tested to ensure that survey language, display, delivery, skip patterns, display logic, and other programmed elements matched project specifications. Personalized survey links were used to restrict access to sampled respondents, prevent duplicate or unauthorized completions, and customize survey content using personalized information, such as respondent names and community college affiliation. We advise that when surveys include college-specific or respondent-specific content, such as customized major lists, validation should go beyond skip patterns and display logic to confirm that embedded data are correctly mapped to the survey content each respondent sees. In our experience, this kind of validation is especially important when surveys draw on multiple institutional data files or when answer choices vary across colleges.

In Waves 2–4 of this project, we developed a web-based sample management system (SMS) that was used to manage respondent contact information, with updates made both manually by project staff and automatically from the Qualtrics survey. Throughout data collection, we monitored survey paradata using reports in Qualtrics and the SMS, including completion rates, time to completion, response patterns, and data quality indicators such as straightlining and item skipping. Paradata were regularly reviewed throughout data collection to confirm that completed surveys were registering as expected and that outreach efforts were producing anticipated response activity.

The SMS was also used to send individualized and bulk email and text message communications to respondents, including messages requested by respondents (e.g., if during a phone outreach call, the respondent asked for the survey to be resent via email). Upon completion of a survey, Qualtrics sent the student's name and email to the SMS, which then generated electronic gift card orders with the appropriate vendor.

Recommendations for Surveying Community College Students

Prioritize in-person class visits for initial student recruitment.

We found that recruiting students in-class played an important role in increasing Wave 1 response rates and for diversifying our initial sample of student respondents. We estimate that about a quarter of students took the survey because of our presence on campus. Additionally, this strategy was associated with a more diverse initial sample, as we successfully recruited more men, Hispanic students, and working students. However, we also observed that students who took the survey in class were less likely to participate in future waves compared to those who completed the survey via email, a result that differed from our initial hypothesis that in-class presentations would build greater connection to the survey over time. While in-class visits can increase the size and diversity of the initial sample—which is valuable for both cross-sectional surveys and for establishing a larger baseline sample in longitudinal studies—they do not appear to improve long-term engagement.

In-person administration also enabled our research team to troubleshoot technical issues in real time and to answer students' questions about the survey, which we would not have been able to do if we relied on email alone. However, in-person visits are expensive in terms of staff time and travel costs, which may make this strategy infeasible or less desirable for some studies, especially when considering the benefits of other strategies, like increasing the dollar amount of the tokens of appreciation. We recommend that for in-house surveys, a college's institutional research office staff consider undertaking classroom visits for survey administration, as they do not have the associated travel expenses and already have connections with faculty—making it easier to request class time and visit many classes.

Emails are important, but make sure they break through crowded inboxes.

Most students took our survey via the link provided in the emails we sent, and nearly all students we interviewed (93%) cited email as their preferred mode of contact. The challenge is that students receive a lot of emails, so it can be hard to break through and capture students' attention. We found that emphasizing the tokens of appreciation that students would receive upon completion of the survey was the most effective strategy for encouraging student participation. We also included our project logo in all emails so that students would be able to easily recognize our study in subsequent waves.

To address some of the challenges associated with using college emails, researchers can include personal email addresses, as many new students may be unfamiliar with how to access or regularly check their college email. Researchers should also ask college IT departments to whitelist the sender address. However, outside-the-college emails can still occasionally be filtered out, so developing a strategy for confirming that students are receiving emails is important.

Phone calls are helpful with response rates, but they are also expensive.

We found that reminder phone calls boost response rates, increasing participation by 10 percentage points in our Wave 2 experiment. However, this is an expensive, high-effort strategy that involves planning, hiring, training, scheduling, and monitoring reminder callers. Reminder calling is nonetheless an effective method for contacting and motivating hard-to-reach and reluctant respondents. Such respondents are crucial to enlist, because they may have different perceptions than more readily contacted and motivated respondents, meaning that the research findings could be incomplete or skewed if these respondents are excluded. Callers can also answer respondents' questions and address their concerns when they have them on the phone. Callers can provide a "personal touch" that is more difficult to refuse than an email or text message, where no human interaction is involved.

Test customized survey content against the underlying sample data.

For surveys that use embedded data to show college-, program-, or student-specific content, testing should include cases from each institution and each relevant subgroup. Teams should confirm that respondents are routed correctly and that the answer choices they see match their college, program, or other linked information.

Implement a sample management system.

Sample management systems (SMSs) are designed to organize and process information needed to collect and maintain participant contact information and survey paradata (such as number of contact attempts made to a participant and survey completion status). SMSs are especially valuable in longitudinal panel studies, where participant contact information and study eligibility often change over time. SMSs often integrate multiple systems used in survey data collection, including survey software, online services (such as electronic gift card processing), communications platforms (such as cell or email carriers), and data repositories. SMSs are used by professional survey research centers and can be licensed online.

SMSs can be costly to set up or license, so if a license is out of a project's price range, we recommend the following for managing the sample:

- Keep a master sample list that includes unique sample identification numbers for each participant, along with any contact information available. This list should be stored in a secure location and only used to store, maintain, and retrieve contact information.
- Keep a master paradata file that includes the sample IDs and information collected about data collection efforts. For example, include information on contact attempts, date when recruited, surveys completed, mode of survey completed, and contact outcomes and notes.
- Keep schedules for sending participant communications that include the mode of contact, contact templates, and dates when each should be sent. It is helpful to also track the number of communications that were actually sent, in order to monitor outreach efforts during data collection and to calculate more accurate response rates later.

These recommendations should be interpreted in light of several limitations. This report draws on one longitudinal survey conducted with first-time students at four community colleges, and the strategies may work differently with other student populations or institutional contexts. In addition, many outreach strategies we used were implemented together and changed across waves, so only the randomized comparisons isolate the effects of specific strategies. Other

findings, including those related to classroom visits, branding, mailed notes and gift cards, respondent preferences, and QR-code use, are descriptive and should be interpreted as practical lessons rather than causal estimates.

Conclusion

Our experience conducting longitudinal survey research with community college students finds that different recruitment methods yield different samples of respondents. Therefore, relying on a single channel for recruitment, such as email, can limit the diversity and representativeness of a survey sample. To capture a broad spectrum of current and former community college students, it is essential to employ a multi-faceted approach. This is particularly critical in longitudinal research, where diverse strategies help ensure that students are reached who may not be captured by the primary communication channel, thereby supporting engagement across multiple waves.

In-person classroom visits can help build a larger and more varied initial respondent sample, but they require substantial coordination and staff time. Email and text messages provide scalable ways to maintain contact across waves, with texts especially useful for generating faster responses. Reminder calls can increase participation among remaining nonrespondents but are more resource-intensive and may be best reserved for harder-to-reach groups.

These lessons underscore the importance of matching recruitment strategies to the goals and capacity of the survey effort. A cross-sectional survey may prioritize broad initial reach, while a longitudinal survey must also invest in maintaining contact information, monitoring response patterns, and adapting outreach across waves. Survey teams should therefore treat recruitment as an ongoing implementation process rather than a one-time invitation or a set of tasks to be carried out once the questionnaire is finalized. Tracking paradata, response modes, delivery problems, contact attempts, and data-quality indicators can help teams identify issues early and adjust strategies before they affect response rates or data quality.

For community college institutional researchers and research organizations, the appropriate mix of strategies will depend on available resources, the population being surveyed, and whether the primary concern is response rate, sample composition, retention, cost, or staff effort. Our findings provide practical lessons for researchers seeking to reach and retain community college students, while recognizing that strategies may need to be adapted to local contexts and student populations. Further research is needed to further understand what strategies work best under what circumstances and for which students. But regardless of the mix of recruitment strategies, to be effective, a strong partnership between researchers, professional survey firms, and study sites is essential. Survey firms are critical for programming surveys, sending communications, managing calls or mailings, and processing incentives. And research teams—in collaboration with the research sites—need to guide the recruitment strategy, monitor response patterns, review paradata, test customized survey content, and make adjustments during fielding.

Endnotes

1. In Wave 2, the research team conducted in-person site visits to all four colleges. We worked with the institutional research offices at the colleges to identify classes that included students who completed Wave 1 of the survey. However, we visited fewer classes in the second wave. This was primarily because there were few classes that had a large cluster of survey respondents (due to diverse coursetaking patterns in the second semester and because only roughly one third of first-year students were in our survey sample). Additionally, unlike in Wave 1, we did not request that faculty provide class time for students to complete the survey; rather, we requested five minutes to inform students about the second wave of the survey. As in Wave 1, we also set up tables in high-traffic areas on campus to remind our survey sample students about the survey. In Wave 2, in addition to offering snacks, we offered prizes (totes, powerbanks, and pens) that showed the project logo.
2. Some interviewees mentioned more than one reason.

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