

Online Survey Administration Response Rates

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

In-class

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

Online

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

Response rates for the 2020 CCSSE 3-year cohort

Average response rate across 482 colleges for the in-class CCSSE administration in the 2020 3-year cohort was 47%.

Response rates for the 2021 online CCSSE participants

Average response rate across 253 colleges for the online CCSSE 2021 administration was 14.4% (see additional information below).

Adequate response rate for online administration

As Table 1 illustrates, a more important measure than response rate may be the total number of respondents at a college. In short, the larger the college or target population, the smaller the response rate needs to be to provide a robust sample.

Table 1

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

Table 2 presents the response rates for the online CCSSE 2021 administration by size of institution.

Table 2

College Size (# of colleges)	Average Response Rate	Maximum Response Rate	Average Number of Respondents
Small	17.5%	52.6%	261
Medium	12.6%	37.6%	516
Large	10.9%	37.7%	793
Extra-large	9.2%	19.8%	1503

Number of respondents needed to conduct breakout analyses

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

Representativeness or response bias

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

Weighting

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

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