Do Incentives Increase Response Rates to an Internet Survey of American Evaluation Association Members?
Findings From a Randomized Experiment

Lyssa N. Wilson1, Chris L. S. Coryn1, Carl D. Westine1, Pedro F. Mateu2, Kristin A. Hobson1, Anne T. Vo1, Daniela C. Schröter1, Erica L. Fiekovsky1, Ruqayyah N. Abu-Obaid1, & Mary Ramlow1
1Western Michigan University. 2University of West Georgia, Universidad del Pacifico, Florida International University, University of Southern California

PURPOSE
This randomized experiment examines the effect of different incentive types on online survey response rates.

The primary objective of this study was to determine the most effective incentive type to increase response rates to online surveys of American Evaluation Association (AEA) members, specifically.

BACKGROUND
The use of online surveys has become increasingly popular as it provides feasible means to gather information from large numbers of people. Compared to other survey dissemination methods, online surveys are perceived to be faster, less expensive, and more effective. According to meta-analysis by Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) 39.6% is the average response rate for online surveys. Surveys of American Evaluation Association members average slightly above 25%, with some as low as 15% or 16%.

METHODS
DESIGN
This study used a between-subjects three-treatment and one control randomized experiment (i.e., a four-group experiment) in which a randomly selected sample of AEA members were randomly assigned to either a non-incentive control condition (C), large incentive condition (Tl), token incentive (Tt), or philanthropic incentive condition (Tf).

SAMPLE
With a statistical power of .80, the total necessary sample size was determined of n = 304, with n = 226 randomly assigned to each of the four conditions. A random sample was drawn using simple random sampling from a sampling frame (N = 7,280) of AEA members obtained in November 2016 from the AEA Executive Board. Although the four groups were randomly assigned to each condition, the deliver rates for each of the conditions varied, resulting in the following total usable sample: C = 218, Tl = 223, Tt = 219, Tf = 225, for a total n = 885.

PROCEDURE
The group with the large incentive (Tl) received the largest response rate with 44%, followed by the token incentive (Tt) with 43%. All of the groups received higher response rates than the average for previous AEA online surveys (25%).

FINDINGS
The group with the large incentive condition (Tl) received the largest response rate with 44%, followed by the token incentive (Tt) with 43%. All of the groups received higher response rates than the average for previous AEA online surveys (25%).

FINDINGS
Identifying your primary work as “evaluation” increases the chances of responding to the online survey by 1.53.

CONCLUSIONS
For this audience, members of the American Evaluation Association, a large incentive is more effective at increasing response rates than a token incentive, philanthropic incentive, or no incentive. However, given that all response rates were above the average response rates of prior online surveys there may be other factors that influence response or nonresponse. The questionnaire used in this investigation was intentionally kept brief and simple. On average, it required less than 10 minutes to complete. Given initial analysis of the qualitative data from open-ended responses, this greatly contributed to respondents’ willingness to complete the survey. In the future, researchers utilizing online surveys should be mindful about the length and complexity of their survey in order to promote higher response rates.