Survey Participation Among Students Documenting Volunteer Hours:
An On-line Versus Handwritten Duel

Background
With nearly 8,000 student volunteers each year, the East Carolina University Volunteer Center is one of the largest such centers on the East Coast. The Center serves as a clearinghouse for volunteer and service-learning opportunities, and is currently responsible for providing volunteers to more than 100 community partner agencies. The Center is also responsible for verification letters, liability insurance, and service-learning resources including sample syllabi, research tools, and reflection guides. Lastly, the Center conducts a survey each semester to determine when and where students volunteer.

Introduction
This study looks at the Volunteer Center’s method of surveying volunteer hours. This process provides an opportunity for students to log their volunteer hours for use on resumes, graduate or professional school applications, scholarship forms or employment applications. For the purposes of this study, we will look at survey participation of students documenting volunteer hours on handwritten versus on-line survey forms. Similar to most surveys, participation is optional. Student volunteers are not required to document their hours. The Volunteer Center offers this documentation as a service, but neither the Volunteer Center nor the University enforces a punishment or withholds any type of privileges for students who chose not to participate.

Problem Statement
Many studies indicate that survey participation is on the decline. Moreover, other research shows certain factors serve to motivate or deter individuals from completing surveys (Couper, Singer and Kulka 69). Based on records obtained from the Volunteer Center over the last five years, most student volunteers who are given a survey to document their volunteer hours choose not to participate. This lack of participation is a potential problem because students are less prepared to apply volunteer hours in a way that helps them achieve personal or professional goals. Additionally, the impact of the Center’s work on behalf of students cannot be fully reflected unless each student’s hours can be accounted for. Information that helps explain the Center’s positive impact on students is also helpful when applying for grant funds and providing outcome-based data.
According to comments from past student volunteers, many report not documenting volunteer hours because they lose the handwritten form, forget to return the form to the Volunteer Center or do not realize the benefits of completing the volunteer hour survey.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

My research question is whether or not East Carolina University student volunteers will report their volunteer hours more frequently if given an on-line method to do so? My hypothesis states, “An on-line survey form will support task completion more than a handwritten survey.”

Groves, Cialdini and Couper believe researchers wishing to understand survey participation would be well advised to consider such factors as respondents’ current moods, feelings of obligation, liking toward survey sponsor, perceptions of the cost/benefit ratio; and to determine the degree to which particular survey designs correlate with survey response (486). This framework is often referred to as the social psychological theory on factors contributing to survey participation. My hypothesis is grounded in this framework, because an on-line volunteer hour survey can specifically address some of these motivating factors including survey design and cost/benefit ratio. Couper, Singer and Kulka found that one variable affecting participants’ ability to complete surveys is time (69). Bickart and Schmittlein echo this sentiment, as they have found Americans are becoming more and more protective of their time (286), and Uslaner has also had similar findings on time pressures and survey participation and nonresponse (1995). The on-line survey format tested here will address this issue by offering students a means to document volunteer hours that is available 24 hours a day and seven days a week, and that addresses some specific social psychological factors affecting survey participation; and ultimately supporting my hypothesis.

In a recent article, the META Group found that 80 percent of employees prefer email for work-related communication for response flexibility, faster communication and productivity (Just Email Me 24). An on-line survey form, which shares many of the same benefits as email, would seem to elicit the same favor among respondents.

**Research Design**

This study will analyze the participation rates of students in handwritten and on-line surveys. The total population (N) is 1000. This number represents the number of students currently having membership in one of East Carolina University’s service fraternities or sororities. This population, as required by their membership, participates in volunteer activities in conjunction with the ECU Volunteer Center. Of this population, a sample (n) of 500 students will be taken. The confidence level of this sample size is
calculated at +/- 4.4%. A sample of 500 students was taken; due in part to the fact the FormBuddy® software used to process the on-line surveys can only handle 300 submissions per semester. During presentations to these students at the beginning of the semester, half will be given the opportunity to participate in the handwritten volunteer hour survey and half in the on-line survey. At the end of the semester, when volunteer hours are due, we will tabulate the total survey submissions by each group.

The on-line survey will be created using Macromedia’s Dreamweaver and Fireworks software programs, while the handwritten survey will use Microsoft Word. Both surveys are comprised of closed-ended questions that include (1) where the student volunteered (agency name and address), (2) when the student volunteered (date and time) and (3) whom at the agency supervised this work. The on-line survey, by design, includes some features not present in the handwritten version: a restriction that prevents forms from being submitted unless they are completed fully, and an automated “thank you” note when surveys are submitted correctly. Careful measures were taken to avoid questions that were confusing, asked suspicious questions or requested information members of this population would not have access to.

Variables and Outcomes
Independent variables for this study include class level, computer experience, age, gender, volunteer experience, access to computer, type of computer and connection to the Internet. Dependent variables include survey design (handwritten and on-line) and access to surveys. The outcomes of this study will prove that students reporting their volunteer hours prefer an on-line method to do so, and that overall task completion rates are higher using this method. One study found that 94 percent of survey respondents said they feel on-line surveys are more convenient, with 91 percent saying they would be likely to participate in an on-line poll again (On-line Research Popular With Survey Participants 1).

Conclusion
Results of this study will be submitted for publication in the Journal of Volunteer Management and the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning. Also, the findings will be factored in the decision of whether or not the Volunteer Center will change its current practices of surveying student volunteer hours, and explore additional means to incorporate on-line services.
Key Terms

*Volunteer Hours:* any time that one spends participating in an ECU Volunteer Center approved activity that benefits an individual and/or the community, and anytime for which the individual receives no monetary compensation for said activity.

*On-line:* attached to or available through a central computer or computer network.

*Report/Complete:* document volunteer hours on the handwritten or on-line form.

*Handwritten:* the volunteer time form that is printed in hardcopy format and requires a volunteer to write in their information with pen or pencil.

*Survey:* the use of a form (on-line or printed) to report information in a strategic way.


