

“What’s in it For Me?” Utilizing School-Based Agricultural Education Curriculum as an Incentive for Teacher Respondents Engaging in Research Studies

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Introduction and Need for Idea

Response rates have been a consistent research challenge in many fields, including school-based agricultural education (SBAE; Chaudhary & Assan, 2024). While incentivizing participation is a strategy to increase engagement and response rates within research, incentives are most commonly thought of being financial in nature, such as gift cards (Lavrakas, 2008). In large studies and in survey research, it is usually not possible to provide each respondent with a gift card as there are also financial limitations for the researcher (Lavrakas, 2008). As such, in instances like these, each respondent is not able to receive equal acknowledgement or credit for their engagement in the study (Lavrakas, 2008). Yet, Homans' (1958) social exchange theory posits that in order to engage our target audience in research, we must communicate low cost, low effort, and the possibility of high reward for themselves or something about which they care.

Teachers lead busy, chaotic lifestyles (Hainline et al., 2015; King et al., 2013), and, oftentimes, the last task they want to do after a long day of teaching is complete a questionnaire for a stranger. However, we must do everything we can to engage with busy SBAE teachers; we value their expertise and rely on it in order to publish impactful, pragmatic research. This dilemma is what led to the development of the idea—sharing SBAE curriculum with all study respondents. It is a win-win from the perspective of the researcher and the teacher; there is no financial cost and aside from compiling the curriculum, requires limited time investment from researchers, and still thanks SBAE teachers for their time. Teachers struggle with curriculum development (Ball et al., 2007; Boone & Boone, 2009; Joerger, 2002; Smith & Smalley, 2018; Traini et al., 2021); helping them with this struggle can benefit them and also benefit our research. If our curriculum is already well-developed, why not share it? The *need* for this idea was rooted in our desire to increase response rates in SBAE research while building positive social capital with teachers by thanking them for their time and, potentially, opening the door to future research collaborations.

Methodology

We conducted a series of research studies in fall 2025 on Qualtrics, and SBAE teachers were invited to a maximum of one study. We informally asked a group of six current SBAE teachers what their thoughts were on our idea and asked for suggestions of curriculum which they believed would be most helpful and impactful for teachers. Three courses were identified, and the corresponding curriculum folders were organized and prepared to be disseminated on Google Drive. We developed comprehensive curriculum folders for each course, organized by units and subunits, which contained lesson plans, slide decks, supplemental materials, and projects with assessment strategies. The curriculum was all implemented not only in [AUTHOR]'s classroom, but in several other teachers' classrooms in [STATE] and [STATE] who had received his curriculum previously. As a result, we believed the curriculum would be appealing and useful for teachers and would make a suitable incentive for our studies. The curriculum folders offered included: (a) animal science, (b) horticulture, and (c) introduction to agriculture. Following Dillman et al.'s (2014) recommendations, we established three points of contact with respondents, and in each communication, the email messages and subject lines included language communicating they would have the choice of receiving a free curriculum as a thank you for their participation. Throughout the data collection window, every Monday morning at 7 a.m., a report was generated from Qualtrics to determine the curriculum folders requested by each

respondent within the past week; these curricula and a corresponding course syllabus were then emailed to the respective respondents who were blind copied (i.e., three separate emails were sent each week—one for each of the three curriculum folder options).

Results and Implications

As a result, response rates were over double of what is typical in “cold call” studies. Generally, cold call studies might only receive 5% to 10% response rates (Wu et al., 2022). Our instruments were lengthy, one of them included over 200 items, yet, this instrument achieved a 21% response rate from over 7,500 potential contacts. The other instruments received response rates ranging from 17% to 33%, with an average of 22%. This idea in itself was not a research study; rather, it was a strategy to increase response rates, and we believe the variation in response rates on the four studies was likely dependent on the topic. These quantitative data support the impact this idea had on data collection, and the increased response rates led to more reliable research findings and the ability for us to conduct some additional types of statistical analysis, such as factor analysis, which would not have been possible with only a 10% response rate.

Further, respondents expressed a great deal of gratitude for the free curriculum incentives they received via response emails sent back to our team, serving as qualitative evidence of the success of this idea. One respondent emailed, “Thanks so much! This is way better than being entered into a drawing; this was a guaranteed outcome. I would’ve spent hours making or finding this curriculum. Let me know if I can help with any projects in the future.” Another shared, “Wow! This curriculum is GREAT! Let me know if you’ve got another survey and I’ll do it.”

Future Plans and Advice

In the future, we plan to continue offering this incentive to SBAE teachers. We plan to expand the number of curriculum folders we can share as well. In our email which shared the curriculum with respondents, we asked for suggestions on other curriculum folders to which they would like access since we have access to over 40. Respondents suggested offering agribusiness, natural resources, and agricultural mechanics in the future. Since the curriculum folders are prepared, our next studies will likely use these as options for respondents to choose from.

For advice to others, we recommend conducting informal needs assessments to determine the curriculum needs of teachers within the target area of interest and then develop and offer curricular incentives which meet those needs. Introduction to agriculture was the most commonly requested folder. Developing different variations of this curriculum tailored to the middle and high school level is another piece of advice for those wishing to implement this idea.

Costs and Resources

An innovative and convenient feature of this idea is that it only requires a curriculum folder the researcher is willing to share—there is no direct or indirect financial cost, and only minimal time needs to be invested if the curriculum is already developed and ready to be shared like in our case. Aside from curriculum and internet access, this idea only requires about 10 minutes of time investment each week to determine who is to receive each folder and to prepare the emails.

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