

The Effects of Sponsorship on Answer Bias and Response Rates in Alumni Surveys

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I. Background and Methodology

Since July 1994, we have been conducting surveys of Stanford alumni that identify Stanford as the sponsor of the surveys. A year later, we conducted an experiment to test three hypotheses:

- That identifying Stanford as the sponsor of surveys might favorably bias alumni response due to “social desirability.” It was feared that alumni might be reluctant to offer critical answers when Stanford asked for them by name and clearly knew other information about them.
- That identifying Stanford as the sponsor of surveys would increase respondent cooperation.
- That surveys are unreliable in measuring behavior – in particular, behavior about financial donations.

The experiment compared response to two surveys conducted with random samples from the identical population – a sponsored survey conducted in July 1994 and an anonymous survey conducted in July 1995.

- In the sponsored survey, respondents were asked for by name and told that Stanford was conducting a survey of alumni.
- In the anonymous survey, the interviewer asked to speak with either a man or a woman with a college degree (depending on the alumnus/alumna we knew we were calling), and no mention of Stanford was ever made. Respondents were simply told that a national public opinion polling firm was conducting a survey on higher education in America. To ensure the respondents were in fact the alumni we intended to reach, the very last question in the anonymous survey asked what college or university they got their undergraduate degree from (and anyone not from Stanford was excluded from the data).
- The questions asked in both surveys were identical and asked in the same order – except wherever Stanford was mentioned in the sponsored survey, the words “your college or university” were mentioned in the anonymous survey.

A better experiment would have compared data collected from a single split-sample survey, with one random sample assigned to the sponsored version and the other random sample assigned to the anonymous version. Circumstances prevented us from doing this. However, the questions chosen for comparison are those for which there is no reason to suspect that responses would have significantly changed between July 1994 and July 1995. Moreover, it was felt that no intervening events had occurred in that period of time that would have significantly affected response to these questions.

Both surveys were with random samples of undergraduate degree holders from Stanford from 1940-1994. Stanford employees and spouses of employees were excluded from the samples. Quotas were established to obtain representation by donor status, class year, and gender proportional to the entire alumni population.

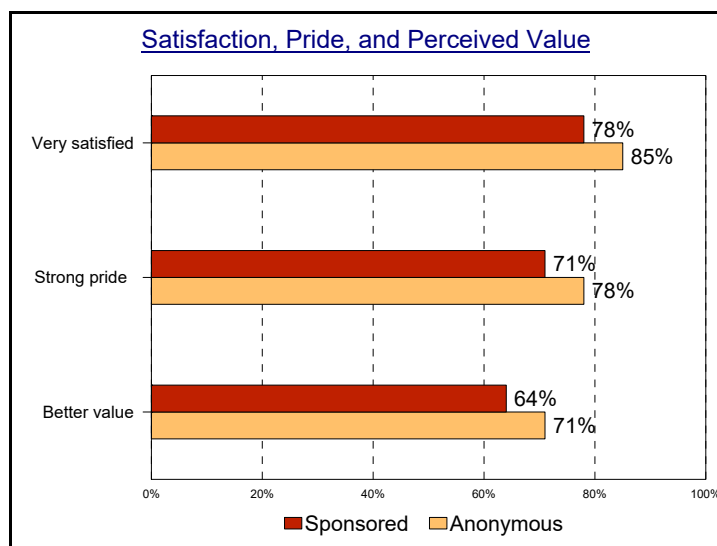
The sponsored survey consisted of 642 professionally administered telephone interviews conducted from July 7-17, 1994 – and has a 95% confidence interval of plus or minus 3.9 percentage points about any one reported percentage. The anonymous survey consisted of 400 professionally administered telephone interviews conducted from July 13- 20, 1995 – and has a 95% confidence interval of plus or minus 4.9 percentage points about any one reported percentage.

II. Findings

Bias

Identifying Stanford as the sponsor of the survey does **not** favorably bias response. Au contraire – on five of the six questions tested, alumni respond somewhat *less* favorably when Stanford is identified:

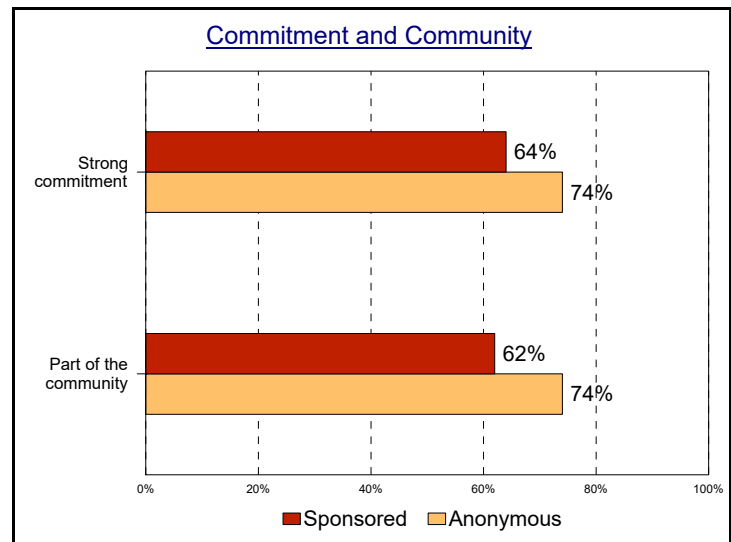
- In the sponsored survey, 78% of alumni say they are *very* satisfied overall with their undergraduate experience – compared with 85% in the anonymous survey.
- In the sponsored survey, 71% of alumni *strongly* agree they take pride in their degree – compared with 78% in the anonymous survey.
- In the sponsored survey, 64% say they got a better value at Stanford than they could have gotten at another college or university – compared with 71% in the anonymous survey.



The differences in responses to the above measures are only barely significant statistically. The differences are somewhat greater, however, on two other measures. In the sponsored survey, alumni are less likely to agree:

- They have a very strong personal commitment to Stanford (64% vs 74% in the anonymous survey).
- Stanford makes them feel like they are still an important part of the university community (62% vs 74% in the anonymous survey).

The only question that does not differ between the sponsored and the anonymous survey asked how intellectually and academically challenging they found their undergraduate program to be.



Three possible explanations for these differences come to mind:

- Alumni may perceive a sponsored survey as an opportunity to speak up and be heard: They know Stanford is asking for their opinions, and may feel that criticism could lead to change and improvements.
- Alumni may be reluctant to be overly critical anonymously, not wishing to air dirty laundry in public. They may feel that expressions of displeasure are best kept “in the family.”
- The frame of reference may be different: In an anonymous survey, alumni may consider their responses in comparison to many other (perhaps less elite) universities, while in a Stanford survey they may consider their responses in context of Stanford alone or in context of Stanford’s peer institutions. For instance, a respondent may feel that in comparison to the education he could have gotten at XYZ State, he is very satisfied with his experience at Stanford – while in comparison to what he expected at Stanford (or could have gotten at Harvard or Yale or MIT) he is only somewhat satisfied.

Cooperation

As anticipated, respondent cooperation is *profoundly* greater when Stanford is identified as the sponsor:

- The sponsored survey encountered 1 refusal for every 11.7 completed interviews – 55 refusals for 642 completed interviews.
- The anonymous survey encountered 1 refusal for every 2.1 completed interviews – 194 refusals for 400 completed interviews.

In fact, these figures *understate* the difference in cooperation because all respondents to the anonymous survey were told up front that the entire survey would take only 2 minutes, while respondents to the sponsored survey were told (if they asked, as many did) that the survey would take about 20 minutes. And previous research has conclusively demonstrated that the length of the interview influences cooperation. It is reasonable to expect that cooperation would have been even lower if respondents to the anonymous survey had been told that it would take 20 minutes.

It should also be noted that the high cooperation rate on the sponsored survey is not a fluke. Every other sponsored survey we have conducted has also encountered 1 refusal for every 9 or 10 completed interviews.

Measuring Giving Behavior

As anticipated, the anonymous survey confirms that giving behavior can not be accurately measured in a telephone survey:

- 56% of respondents in the anonymous survey said they had made a gift in the past year to the annual fund – while the alumni database indicates that only 25% of them actually had. (This question was not asked in the sponsored survey.)

III. Recommendations

Continue to identify Stanford in future surveys. Potential bias appears to be small – but potential cost savings is large. Moreover, any bias that may be introduced seems to be *unfavorable* to Stanford, so the data should not present an overly rosy picture or mislead us into a false sense of security (which could cause greater mischief than data that might slightly overstate certain dissatisfaction or criticism).

Continue to use data from the alumni database for factual measurements and behavior for which the database has accurate and complete data (such as donor history, Alumni Association membership, class year, etc). Survey respondents can not be relied upon to accurately recollect past behavior – or to accurately report behavior on sensitive or embarrassing subjects.