

Increasing Trainee Survey Responses: Best Practice Methods for Obtaining High Response Rates from Trainees

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Introduction

The Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD, aucd.org) is a network of interdisciplinary centers advancing policy and practice for and with individuals with developmental and other disabilities, their families, and communities. A component of these centers includes interdisciplinary training through both University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) and Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) programs.

There is currently at least one UCEDD in every US state and territory, with a total of 67 UCEDDs across the country. These UCEDDs are authorized under Public Law 106-402 (The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000) and mandated to implement the core functions of pre-service preparation, services, research, and information dissemination between university and community. Their core funding is administered by the Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD).

Within the United States there are currently 43 LEND programs located in 37 states. The LENDs are funded through the Combating Autism Act (2006) and administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)'s Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB). The core function of LEND programs is to provide long-term, graduate level training in the field of neurodevelopmental disabilities to trainees from a wide range of academic disciplines, including family members and self-advocates.

The federal agencies who fund UCEDDs LENDs, ADD and MCHB respectively, are subject to the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) (Public Law 103-62), which is a method of government oversight to ensure results and improve project management. ADD and MCHB each define the measures for which they will report UCEDD and LEND performance and progress. (The LEND programs follow the GPRA requirements; however they are referred to by MCHB as "Performance Measures." For the purpose of this report, all information which is required under GPRA and then provided by the programs will be referred to as "GPRA measures.") The GPRA measures defined for both UCEDDs and LENDs require that they report on each individual program's annual performance, including information acquired from surveying their trainees. Both programs are required to survey their trainees one, five, and ten years after their traineeship has concluded. The information acquired through the survey varies between UCEDD and LEND programs due to the information required by each program's funders. From the UCEDD trainee survey, only data gathered from two questions are included in the GPRA measures:

1. What is the number of individuals with developmental disabilities who are receiving direct services through activities in which you are involved?
2. Are you in a leadership position in the field of developmental disabilities?

For the LEND training programs, a trainee survey is used to gather data for the following performance measures as well as a number of additional required data elements:

1. The percentage of graduates of MCHB long-term training programs that demonstrate field leadership after graduation (PM #08)
2. The percent of long-term trainees who, at 1, 5 and 10 years post-training work in an interdisciplinary manner to serve the MCH population (PM #60)
3. The percent of long-term training graduates who are engaged in work related to MCH populations (PM #84)

Despite the requirement that all UCEDD and LEND trainees be surveyed in order to retrieve the data for the GPRA measures, most programs struggle to obtain high response rates from their trainees. This report responds specifically to technical assistance needs from UCEDDs and LENDs regarding increasing the response rate of trainees for the GPRA measures. In this activity, AUCD conducted interviews with training directors and former trainees from five network programs which consistently reported the highest response rates from their trainees. This report provides suggested practices used by these Centers to obtain high survey response rates from trainees.

Methodology

AUCD staff identified five Centers that have consistently obtained the highest response rates from their trainees for all three trainee reporting categories: one, five and ten years post-traineeship and conducted interviews with them to determine their strategies for success in obtaining high trainee survey response rates. These Centers included Iowa's University Center for Excellence on Disabilities, the Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities program, the University of Oklahoma's Center for Interdisciplinary Learning and Leadership, the Center on Human Development and Disabilities at the University of Washington, and the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Emails were sent to the directors and training directors requesting a time to interview the training director along with anyone else who they believed to be a key staff member in the process of surveying trainees. Interviews were conducted with all five Centers. Interviews were also conducted with former trainees from across the network. All interviews took approximately 30 minutes and asked the following questions:

Questions:

Training Directors:

1. Would you please describe your survey method(s)?
2. How do you inform your trainees about the survey?
3. Are your trainees told that the data collected from the surveys is required by the funding agency that supports their training and necessary for the program to continue to receive funding?

4. Do you use any type of trainee handbook or materials?
 - a. If yes, then...
 - i. Was information about the survey included in this material?
 - ii. Can we add these materials to our national resources for other Centers?
5. When are your trainees first told about the survey? Is it mentioned again later?
6. Do you have trainees complete an exit survey?
7. Is your post-traineeship survey electronic or paper?
8. Have you received any feedback about your survey methods?
9. What can AUCD do to support your efforts in obtaining trainee survey responses? What ways can ADD/MCHB provide more guidance?
10. Are there other things that you think would increase the number of trainees responding to the survey one year after the traineeship? 5 years after the traineeship? 10 years after the traineeship?
11. What method do you currently use to keep trainees' contact information up to date?

Former Trainees:

1. Were you informed about post- traineeship surveys?
 - a. If yes, then....
 - i. How did you find out about the survey?
 - ii. Who did you find out about the survey from?
 - iii. Was there information about the survey in your trainee handbook or materials?
 - iv. When were you first told about the survey? Was it mentioned again since?
 - v. Were you told that the data collected from the surveys is required by the funding agency that supports your training and necessary for the program to continue to receive funding?
2. Have you received a post-traineeship survey?
 - a. If yes, then....
 - i. Did you complete it?
 - ii. Was it electronic or paper?
 - iii. Was the survey 1, 5, or 10 years after your traineeship?
3. Did you have any trainee handbook or materials when you began your traineeship?
4. Did you complete an exit survey?
5. What would increase the likelihood of trainees responding to the survey one year after the traineeship? 5 years after the traineeship? 10 years after the traineeship?

Results and Discussion

From the series of interviews conducted with both Center training directors and former trainees, four themes of best practice were identified as the key components to yielding high trainee survey response rates. These four themes included 1) explanation for conducting the trainee surveys, 2) the timing of information dissemination, 3) the use of concrete prompts, and 4) the diligence of Center staff.

Explanation for Conducting Trainee Surveys

Both Center staff and former trainees reported that understanding the use of the survey: to inform future legislation and policy development, amplified the necessity for trainees to complete the survey. Center staff shared that trainees were receptive when they were told that Congress tracks the data for future funding for not only the training programs in place, but also for other initiatives within the developmental disability community. One training director said, “I try to drive the point home by telling them that continuation of future traineeships in part depends on their willingness to respond.” This training director has recently started mentioning different funding cuts in the developmental disability community to further stress the importance of responding. Another Center staff member stated that they tell their trainees, “To Congress, no response [to the survey] reads the same as ‘I didn’t think the program was valuable’.” All interviewees reported that hearing directly from different disciplines about the importance and scarcity of interdisciplinary training programs in the field of developmental disabilities further motivated trainees to complete the survey after the traineeship.

Timing of Information Dissemination

Center staff found that during the traineeship it is crucial to mention the post-trainee survey at specific times during the year. The first time that it is recommended to mention the survey is at the beginning of the traineeship, during the orientation or program overview. The second time during the year that it is recommended to mention the survey is during the time that the Center is writing their annual report and utilizing the former trainee survey responses to provide data for the report. One staff member said that reminding trainees about the survey at this point “gives a concrete example so that the trainees know that we actually use their surveys; it’s not a waste of their time to complete.” The final time during the traineeship at which it is essential to mention the survey is at the end of the traineeship. Former trainees said that they remembered “hearing” the final reminder due largely to already knowing about the survey by the previous reminders throughout the traineeship.

Use of Concrete Prompts

The utilization of different resources greatly assisted Centers in obtaining high trainee response rates to the surveys. One Center annually creates trainee class magnets as a tool to remind trainees to update their contact information with the Center as well as respond to the survey. The magnets have a group picture of the trainees from the current year’s class, a reminder to update their contact information, and the future dates that they will need to complete the survey. Members of the class receive a magnet at the end of the traineeship. Another resource that some Centers reported using was notebooks developed by the individual Centers which include the program’s logistical information and didactic material. These notebooks assist the trainees throughout the year in keeping materials organized and readily assessable, such as a handout explaining the survey and GPRA measurements. Another Center has created a website for their trainees with updates, materials, and even a registration link for them to enter their information when their program begins. Training directors also mentioned that they utilize the Interdisciplinary Trainee Handbook written by AUCD’s National Training Directors Council as a way to provide standardized guidance.

All interviewed Centers reported utilizing the national, web-based data reporting and retrieval system for the AUCD network known as NIRS. During trainee seminars held throughout the

year, training directors or data coordinators showed NIRS to the trainees as a way to further demonstrate how the survey data is incorporated into the larger Center report. They also demonstrated how utilizing the public search on NIRS allows trainees to find out what projects and activities are occurring across the network. This helps to further familiarize the trainees with larger initiatives across the network.

Diligence of the Center Staff

The relationships built and the perseverance of staff to maintain ties to trainees is the final best practice theme that the interviewees reported as essential to obtaining high response rates. Former trainees who were interviewed reported that the most notable reason that they continued to respond to the surveys was due to the strong relationship that they built with the Center staff members who were in charge of all post-traineeship correspondence. During the interviews, all Centers indicated that there was one consistent person who corresponded with the trainees about the surveys and updating trainee addresses. Trainees became familiar with this staff member throughout their traineeship due to this staff member's ongoing participation and involvement with trainees. In one case this individual was the Center's data coordinator who said, "Whomever is in charge of making sure the trainees complete the surveys must be dedicated to the trainees themselves, so that the trainees will remember their name one, five, and even ten years out." Another Center staff member who was interviewed said that they try to sustain the strong relationships they have established by sending a thank-you email to trainees who responded to the survey as well as emails between surveys simply inquiring about the well-being of the former trainees.

The diligence of the Center staff is also demonstrated by the great lengths that they go through to maintain and update trainee addresses in order to yield the high response rates. All five Centers reported that they have contacted former trainee's parents, employers, college alumni groups, and even searched online to ensure that addresses are accurate. Another way that Centers have kept engaged with trainees in recent years has been through social media outlets such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Interviewees also mentioned that they send out email reminders to former trainees far enough in advance of the survey due dates to allow for updating incorrect addresses. They also send follow-up reminders to personally encourage trainees to complete the surveys and remind them of their positive experience as a trainee.

Conclusion

This report provides specific examples of practices that have resulted in the highest trainee response rates from Centers in the AUCD network. AUCD encourages Centers to utilize these practices and others in an effort to increase trainees' survey responses throughout the network. AUCD also recommends that Centers continue to share their ideas and examples of practices that have proven successful in this area.