J. PAUL GRAYSON and RICHARD MYLES

HOW RESEARCH ETHICS BOARDS ARE UNDERMINING SURVEY RESEARCH ON CANADIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

ABSTRACT. In Canada, all research conducted by individuals associated with universities must be subjected to review by research ethics boards (REB). Unfortunately, decisions reached by REBs may seriously compromise the integrity of university-based research. In this paper attention will focus on how requirements of REBs and a legal department in four Canadian universities affected response rates to a survey of domestic and international students. It will be shown that in universities in which students were sent a legalistic cover letter to a mail survey, or were required to sign a consent form, lower response rates were achieved than in universities in which students were sent a relatively friendly letter. In turn, lower response rates resulted in: sample characteristics that deviated from population characteristics; a reduction in the possibility of testing research hypotheses; and increased survey costs. As a consequence, it is argued that the unreasonable demands of REBs are seriously compromising the quality of research that can be carried out on Canadian university students.

KEY WORDS: research ethics, response rates, students, surveys

INTRODUCTION

In Canada, all universities have been required to establish research ethics boards (REBs) consistent with Tri-Council guidelines to ensure that university based research is 'conducted according to the highest ethical standards' (Canada, 2003). Unfortunately, in some cases, REBs make decisions that are 'ethically correct' in terms of Tri-Council guidelines, but inconsistent with the canons of sound and otherwise ethical research (for more general information see van den Hoonaard (2002)). In some institutions further barriers to research are imposed by university legal departments.

An example of REBs and legal departments imposing barriers on otherwise ethical research is provided by the unfriendly and legalistic wording required in cover letters and/or consent forms that accompany student surveys. Although the objective of such letters is to encourage students to participate in inquiries, it will be shown in this article that the text required by some REBs and legal departments seriously reduces response rates, detracts from hypothesis testing, and increases research costs. As a result of possibilities such as these, meaningful survey research on university students in Canada could well come to an end.

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BACKGROUND

Since 1998, all research involving human subjects in Canadian universities has been required to undergo the scrutiny of research ethics boards to ensure that, among other things, no harm will befall human subjects as a result of the research. In the United States, similar requirements have been in place since 1981 (Haggerty, 2004). In Canada, research ethics boards are comprised of individuals from different departments who often must comment on the extent to which research outside of their sphere of expertise adheres to Tri-Council guidelines. Haggerty notes that there is an "explicit expectation of the Tri-Council that participants will sign a release form demonstrating that they have read and understand a summary of the research and any risks that it might entail" (Haggerty, 2004).

Collaborative research involving scholars from different universities must meet the standards of each university. As a result, while a research project or practice may be acceptable in one university, it may be totally unacceptable in another. The practical result of this requirement is that inter-university research is constrained by the requirements of the most ethically conservative university. The net effect of these and other constraints is that in the humanities and social sciences Canadian scholars are frequently compelled to make what are from their point of view unwarranted changes in research topics and methodologies in order to receive REB approval for their research proposals (van den Hoonaard, 2005).

Few would question that researchers should take all measures to prevent harm to research subjects. There would be less agreement on what constitutes harm. Clearly, individuals involved in drug trials in which they might receive a drug with harmful side effects should be aware of that possibility. In situations such as these it is reasonable to insist on protocols ensuring that research subjects are fully cognizant of the risks of the research and that they sign consent forms attesting to that fact.

Although there have been instances of questionable research practices in the social sciences (Humphreys, 1970), it is doubtful that some practices, such as surveys, likely entail risk for participants. Nonetheless, consistent with Tri-Council Guidelines, the general principals that govern drug trials are applied to social surveys. As a result, members of REBs, who may have no expertise in the social sciences in general, and social surveys in particular, can insist upon changes in matters such as letters that accompany mail surveys, wording of survey questions, and how samples are selected, to make them ethically correct. The results of

such demands can be costly to the researcher and can undermine the integrity of the research.

Response Rates

Typically, the ratio of individuals who respond to a survey compared to those who are invited to respond is called the response rate. Considerable research has been conducted into the factors that affect response rates (Dillman, 2000; Dillman & Carley-Baxter, 2000; Fox, Crask, & Kim, 1988). Unfortunately, space constraints prevent an examination of all the ways in which the demands of REBs can negatively affect them. It is possible, however, to examine how REB and legal department requirements for survey cover letters can depress survey response rates, detract from hypothesis testing, and increase research costs.

Research has shown that in mail surveys, among other things, the nature of the covering letter that accompanies the questionnaire can have serious implications for response rates. Individuals who receive a warm and friendly letter explaining the purpose of a survey are more likely to respond than those who receive an unfriendly letter laden with ethically correct jargon. The doyen of survey research, Donald Dillman, gives the following advice on this matter:

> It is useful when writing cover letters to create a mental image of an acquaintance with an educational level a little lower than the average of the survey population from which assistance is being requested. Then a letter is composed that communicates specifically to them. My goal is to find a style and specific wording that reflects normal social interaction surrounding a diplomatic and socially appropriate request. The written request is... aimed at conveying an attitude of straight forward communication that is not misleading, just as would be done in a conversation with a person with whom we hoped to maintain a mutually respectful relationship (Dillman, 2000, p. 159).

There are a considerable number of researchers who are supportive of Dillman's approach to cover letters (Fox et al., 1988; Olsen, Schneiderman & Armstrong, 1993; Singer, von Thurn & Miller, 1995). Most recently, a macro examination of 292 studies dealing with ways of increasing response rates to mail surveys concluded that cover letters that were personalized increased the odds of response by a factor of 1.06 to 1.28 (Edwards et al., 2002). What this means is that if an impersonal letter obtained 100 replies from a given population, a friendly and personalized letter would raise the number of respondents to as many as 128.

One of the concerns of REBs and legal departments is that potential survey respondents be aware that their responses will be treated confidentially. Indeed, much text in cover letters is often devoted to

making this point clear. Ironically, however, if the content of the survey is not sensitive, detailed explanations of confidentiality may actually arouse suspicion on the part of potential respondents (Singer, Hippler & Schwarz, 1992). As Dillman (Dillman, 2000, p. 163) puts it, "There must be a problem as they wouldn't be telling me all this stuff about protection." By contrast, when survey content is sensitive, elaborate explanations of confidentiality may increase response rates (Singer et al., 1995).

As a result of considerations such as the foregoing, survey researchers typically spend a lot of time crafting effective covering letters. Such letters are sometimes tested in focus group meetings with individuals similar to those who will be involved in the survey. In a sense, the expertise that is needed for effective letter writing is comparable to the expertise needed in the setting up of scientific apparatus for an experiment – there is a right and wrong way to do it.

In recent years writing effective introductory letters for surveys has become more and more important as it has become increasingly difficult to obtain acceptable response rates. In the United States, for example, in the 1960s, response rates for national student surveys were in the 60% range but by the 1990s they had dropped to as low as 20% (Dey, 1997). The current National Survey of Student Engagement in the United States has a response rate of 42% (NSSE, 2004); however, response rates for 316 institutions range from 14% to 70% for the same survey administered in the same way (NSSE, 2003). Prior to the imposition of stringent (yet inappropriate) ethics requirements at York University response rates ranged from a high of 85% for students who had not yet entered the university to 60% for program reviews.

Research has shown that the higher the response rate, the greater the probability that the sample reflects the characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. In general, certain groups, such as males (Curtin, Presser & Singer, 2000; Groves & Couper, 1996; Moore & Tarnai, 2002; Singer, van Hoewyk & Mather, 2000), and individuals with low incomes (Curtin et al., 2000; Goyder, 1986; Goyder, Warriner & Miller, 2002; Groves, Singer & Corning, 2000; Kandel & Raveis, 1983; Singer, Groves & Corning, 1999), are less likely to respond to surveys than females and individuals with high incomes. Research has also shown that the response rate for the old is lower than for the young (Goyder, 1986; Kaldenberg, Koenig & Becker, 1994; Kandel & Raveis, 1983; Lowe & McCormack, 1955; Moore & Tarnai, 2002) and that in the United States Blacks are less likely to complete surveys than Whites (Curtin et al., 2000; Groves et al., 2000; Singer et al., 1999; Singer et al., 2000; Voigt, Koepsell, & Daling, 2003). In general, independent of the

demographic group under consideration, potential survey participants are more likely to respond to surveys if they have an interest in the topic under study (Filion, 1975; Kojetin, Borgida & Snyder, 1993; Pearl & Fairley, 1985; Stinchcombe, Jones & Sheatsley, 1981; Van Kenhove, Wijnen & De Wulf, 2002). Surveyors obviously must work hard at obtaining the participation of certain groups, and the lower the final response rate, the lower the probability of inclusion of groups that are hard to reach.

As will be shown below, in the current study, all potential respondents were first year university students with, by definition, the same level of education. For populations such as this, research has shown that response rates vary in the same way as in the general population. For example, among post-secondary students, males are less likely to respond to surveys than females (Crawford, Couper & Lamias, 2001; Dey, 1997; Hutchinson, Tollefson & Wigington, 1987; NCES, 2002; NSSE, 2003; Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003). In addition, in the United States, Black students are less responsive to surveys than Whites (Dey, 1997; NCES, 2002). Students with low grades participate less in surveys than those with high grades (Dey, 1997). Although there are dissenting voices (Porter & Whitcomb, 2005), research also indicates that students who are minimally involved on their campuses are less likely than others to participate in surveys (Kuh, 2003), as are those who do not receive financial aid (NCES, 2002). Importantly, students with 'investigative' personality characteristics respond more than others to surveys while those with 'enterprising' personality characteristics respond less (Porter & Whitcomb, 2005).

The Study

In 2003 researchers at York, the University of British Columbia, McGill, and Dalhousie received support from SSHRC to study the experiences and outcomes of domestic and international students over the first three years of study. The research design involved conducting 16 focus groups in the first year of study and eight in each of the following two years. At the end of each year of study students also received a questionnaire designed to measure their experiences over the previous year.

Consistent with Tri-Council guidelines, the research proposal was subject to review by local REBs. In a couple of universities there were protracted negotiations with REBs before the study was allowed to proceed. One of the products of such negotiations was the letter of introduction that was to accompany the survey.

The first letter of introduction was approved by the REB at York. It was designed to provide potential participants with the information required by the Tri-Council without discouraging participation. Even so, it was less than ideally personalized. The approved letter was presented to the REBs in other universities and with only minor modifications was finally accepted at Dalhousie. At McGill however, while the REB required only minor modifications of the letter, the legal department also insisted on a highly legalistic consent form. At UBC the letter was rejected in favor of a highly detailed and legalistic letter. Copies of each can be found in the Appendix. In short, the letters from York, Dalhousie, and McGill were somewhat consistent with procedures designed to maximize response rates. The letter from UBC was not. Similarly, despite a relatively acceptable letter for McGill, the required consent form was very legalistic and impersonal.

Although the questionnaires used for each university were identical, differences in data collection were required. The Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University undertook data collection at York and UBC; however, a combination of local procedures and provincial laws required that for McGill and Dalhousie data be collected locally. As a result, ISR co-ordinated data collection at these universities so that it was carried out in exactly the same way as at York and UBC. Each student received an initial questionnaire, a reminder card, if necessary a second questionnaire, and, if still no response had been received, a final questionnaire. This method has been shown to maximize response rates to mail surveys (Dillman, 2000).

Given the nature of the letter for UBC and the required consent form for McGill, we anticipated a relatively low response rate from these universities. To be certain that any difference in response rate could be attributed to the letter and consent form and not to any differences in student characteristics, we decided to send the UBC letter and the McGill letter and consent form (with institution names changed) to sub-samples of students at York. In essence, embedded in the larger study, was a study in which some students at York received the standard York letter while others received the same package as students at UBC and McGill. This experiment would allow us to more fully examine the effect of letters and the consent form on response rates.

RESULTS

The response rates from each university are found in Table I. The overall response rate to the survey was a disappointing 33%. There are, however, considerable differences from one university to the next.

TABLE I
Response rates by university

UBC	33%
N	517
York	43%
N	510
Dalhousie	38%
N	167
McGill	20%
N	232
Total *N*	1415

Chi-square significant 0.001. Power = 0.99.

Consistent with expectations, response rates were highest among York (43%) and Dalhousie (38%) students. Students at these universities received the most appropriate cover letters. Also consistent with expectations, response rates were lowest at UBC (33%) and McGill (20%). Recall that students at UBC received a relatively legalistic cover letter. While those at McGill received a letter comparable to those used at York and Dalhousie, they also got a legalistic consent form. Differences in response rates are statistically significant.

Table II contains the response rates from York students as reported in Table I (43%) as well as the response rates of York students who were sent the UBC letter (24%) and the McGill letter along with the McGill consent form (29%). As expected, the response rate of York students who received the original York letter was considerably higher than the response rates of the other two groups. In contrast to the situation revealed in Table I, in the experimental group, response rates were higher for McGill than for UBC students. Taken by themselves, however, differences between these two groups were not statistically significant. In essence, in the experimental situation, response rates of students who received the UBC letter and the McGill letter and consent form were the same, and low. Overall differences in response rates among York students receiving the original York letter and those in the two experimental groups were statistically significant. Thus, in view of the statistically significant differences found in Tables I and II, it can be concluded that different letters required by REBs and the consent form required by the legal department at McGill had serious consequences for response rates.

TABLE II
Response rates of experimental groups

York–York	43%
N	510
York–UBC	24%
N	54
York–McGill	29%
N	68
Total *N*	632

Note: For comparisons among all three, chi-square significant 0.001. Power = 0.99. For comparison between York–UBC and York–McGill, chi-square not statistically significant. Power = 0.17.

Consequences of Different Response Rates

There are three major ways in which low response rates can affect research based on surveys. First, samples with low response rates often inadequately mirror the populations from which they are drawn. Second, as the possibility of statistically significant results is related to sample size, surveys with low response rates may yield insufficient numbers of cases on which to test hypotheses. The possible result of this situation is the assumption of no relationship between variables when in fact there is a relationship in the population. Third, low response rates increase the unit cost of surveys. For example, if the response to the first wave of the survey is low, more reminder cards and second questionnaires must be sent out than if response to the first wave were high.

Sample Representativeness

In the current study, it is possible to examine the response rates of males and females and domestic and international students and assess the extent to which samples are reflective of the populations of each university. The results of these comparisons are presented in Table III. Given the nature of the data, it is not possible to make comparisons in the attitudes, behaviors, and personalities of survey respondents and populations.

Consistent with the earlier discussion, we might expect that the degree of dissimilarity between sample and population characteristics would vary by response rate: sample data from York and Dalhousie would be more reflective of the population than data from UBC and McGill. From

TABLE III
Comparisons between populations and samples

	Population	Sample	Significant chi-square	Power if alpha = 0.05
UBC				
Male	40%	33%	0.01	0.82
Domestic	52%	52%	NS	0.05
N	1714	511		
York				
Male	42%	31%	0.001	0.99
Domestic	70%	72%	NS	0.13
N	1251	507		
Dalhousie				
Male	44%	37%	NS	0.15
Domestic	62%	69%	NS	0.39
N	576	176		
McGill				
Male	39%	31%	0.05	0.63
Domestic	65%	73%	0.05	0.66
N	1298	228		

Table III it is clear that, consistent with previous research, in all universities the response rates of males were lower than their representation in the population (the corollary is that females were over-represented). For example, at UBC 40% of students in the population were male; however, only 33% of the sample were male. Moreover, for all universities but Dalhousie, differences between the number of males in the population and samples are statistically significant.

For student status there are also differences between populations and samples. At McGill, for example, domestic students were over-represented in the sample. In the population, 65% of potential respondents were domestic students; however, 73% of the students in the sample had domestic status. These differences are statistically significant. In other universities differences in the response rates of domestic and international students did not vary in a statistically significant fashion.

Overall, table data suggest statistically significant differences between the population and the sample for both sex and student status at McGill. This might be expected because McGill had the lowest response rate. The highest response rates were achieved for York and Dalhousie. As a

result, we might expect that differences between population and sample characteristics would be least likely to be statistically significant at these two universities. This is true for Dalhousie where differences in sex and student status are not statistically significant. It is less true for York at which sex based differences are statistically significant but student status differences are not significant. Moreover, despite a relatively low response rate, at UBC population and sample differences are statistically significant for sex but not for student status. Although the relationship is not perfect, these findings at least indicate some support for the notion that samples with high response rates are more likely than those with low response rates to mirror the population from which the sample was drawn. As a result, ethics procedures that contribute to low response rates also detract from the overall representativeness of samples.

Hypothesis Testing

For any given effect size, statistical significance is a function of sample size. As a result, low response rates are more likely to result in the researcher concluding that sample differences do not reflect differences in the population than high response rates. In the current study, this point can be illustrated by reference to Table IV.

The table summarizes data on the percentage of classes, tutorials, etc. attended by domestic and international students in an average week (class involvement). In the current study it can be hypothesized that because of difficulties with English, international students likely attend fewer of their classes than domestic students. As seen in the table, at UBC, domestic students state that they attend 93% of their classes while the figure for their international peers is only 88%. Moreover, these differences are statistically significant. In essence, at UBC, the findings are consistent with the hypothesis. Among York students the class attendance record of domestic and international students is similar – 90% and 91%, respectively. Figures such as these do not support the hypothesis. At McGill, domestic students attend 89% of their classes and international students 85% of their classes. Differences, however, are not statistically significant; therefore, although the findings are in the predicted direction, they cannot be used in support of the hypothesis. At Dalhousie domestic students have an attendance record of 89% while the figure for international students is 84%. Again, the differences are in the predicted direction; however, because they are not statistically significant they do not support the hypothesis. In sum, among the universities, only differences at UBC are statistically significant and they support the hypothesis.

TABLE IV
Class involvement

		Significant	Power if P = 0.05	Power if RR = York
UBC				
Domestic	93%			
International	88%			
N	512	0.003	0.86	0.95
York				
Domestic	90%			
International	91%			
N	506	0.889	0.05	NA
McGill				
Domestic	89%			
International	85%			
N	229	0.081	0.42	0.70
Dalhousie				
Domestic	89%			
International	84%			
N	174	0.116	0.33	NA

Recall, however, that the number of cases on which the analyses are based represent different response rates for the universities. If we hypothetically increase response rates for UBC and McGill to those of York (response rates for Dalhousie are similar to those of York), we can estimate the probability of achieving a statistically significant result with the new response rate. Although the differences at UBC are already statistically significant, a hypothetical increase in the response rate increases the probability of obtaining a statistically significant result between domestic and international students from 0.86 to 0.95. More importantly, a hypothetical increase in response rate for McGill to that of York raises the probability of getting a statistically significant result from 0.42 to 0.70. As a result, had the McGill response rate been equal to that of York, there is a good chance that differences in the class involvement of domestic and international students would have been statistically significant. This would have meant that the findings for both UBC and McGill would have supported the hypothesis that domestic students are more involved in their classes than international students. Differences in response rates have the potential to affect analyses of other hypotheses as well. As a result, it can be argued that the consent form required by

McGill that contributed to a low response rate had serious implications for hypothesis testing.

Research Costs

The final consequence of different response rates that warrants discussion is their effect on research costs. As noted earlier, the lower the response rate to the first wave of a survey, the more reminder cards and, potentially, second questionnaires and second reminder cards that must be mailed to encourage participation. The costs incurred in these activities can be divided into four categories: (a) survey management; (b) printing, postage, and labour associated with mailing; (c) logging returns and data entry; and (d) file preparation. The costs of survey management and file preparation are relatively fixed independent of the response rate. The costs of printing, postage, and the labour associated with mailing the survey, however, vary inversely with the response rate: the lower the response rate, the more that has to be spent on printing, postage, and labour. By comparison, the higher the response rate the greater the costs of logging returns and data entry. For some activities low response rates result in higher costs while for other activities low response rates lead to lower costs.

In the current study, because the same questionnaire was being sent to students using the same mail-out strategy in four universities, it was possible to estimate the unit cost of each completed questionnaire for each university. When this was done, it was found that unit costs differed little among York (43% response rate), Dalhousie (38% response rate), and UBC (33% response rate). The unit costs at McGill (20% response rate), however, were 55% higher than at the other universities! Clearly, to the degree that the requirements of REBs and legal departments affect response rates, they also have consequences for research costs.

CONCLUSION

In this paper it has been shown that there are ways of maximizing responses to surveys in general, and student surveys in particular. One of the ways of obtaining high response rates involves writing a friendly and personalized letter to prospective respondents in which they are encouraged to complete a questionnaire. Unfortunately, the demands of REBs and legal departments can lead to cover letters that are ethically correct, but unfriendly and legalistic. The result of letters such as these is reduced response rates. In turn, reduced response rates contribute to:

samples that are less representative of the population than they might otherwise be; difficulties in hypothesis testing; and increased research costs.

Interference in the research process of this nature, *with no demonstrable payoff for potential research participants*, poses a serious threat to research. The problem is likely to become more serious if participation in surveys of all kinds continues to decline. In the near future, the net effect of general declines in response rates compounded in studies of university students by ethically correct yet unfriendly and impersonal cover letters, could very well mark the end of meaningful survey research on Canadian university students.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the foregoing analysis are simple. As surveys are not drug trials in which there may potential harm to participants, and as arbitrary decisions made by members of REBs with no expertise in survey research may seriously affect the quality and cost of survey research, approval of survey research projects should be taken out of the hands of REBs. There is no reason to believe that survey researchers themselves are incapable of designing and implementing ethical research. If this action is not taken, survey researchers should take whatever steps are necessary to circumvent the unreasonable demands of REBs. Action such as this is common in situations in which decision makers have lost the confidence of those affected by the decisions.

Decisions taken by legal departments that affect research may require a different strategy. If certain measures that present unwarranted barriers to research are clearly required by law, action should be taken that would lead to a change in such laws. If, on the other hand, barriers are suspected to be the result of overly cautious interpretations of legal requirements, faculty associations should obtain legal opinions on the suitability of such interpretations and, when appropriate, lobby their administrations to act in ways that promote research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Will van den Hoonaard for comments made on an earlier draft of the paper.

Appendix: Cover Letters and Consent Form

UBC Letter

Dear UBC Student (personalized with student's name),

I am conducting a study to learn more about the first year experiences of Canadian and International undergraduate students attending UBC. As a first year student at UBC, you are a valuable source of information and I hope you will agree to participate. This study is part of a larger three year longitudinal research project on the first year student experience at four universities and is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

I would like to invite you to participate in this project by filling out the enclosed questionnaire. If you agree to participate, your involvement will consist of filling out the questionnaire, which will take approximately 45 min, and returning it by mail in the stamped envelope provided. In 2005 and 2006, I will invite you to complete another questionnaire.

Also, I am interested in the relationship between students' experiences and matters like grades, and whether students return to the university to complete their studies. In addition to the information you provide on the questionnaire, we will be linking institutional records (including grade point average, number of credits earned, and TOEFL score if applicable) to questionnaire data. An ID number will be used to link the data; your name will **never** be used.

You can find information about this study on the ***International and Domestic Undergraduate Student*** research site at: http:\\www.canises.com. As soon as they are available, summaries of the findings and newsletters generated from this study, along with other useful information for students studying at Canadian universities, will be posted on this site.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you complete this questionnaire it will be assumed that your consent has been given. Please be assured that the data from questionnaires will be treated in a confidential manner. You will not be identified by name on the questionnaires or in any reports or publications resulting from this project. During this study, you are entitled to receive answers to any questions that you may have. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time during this research project. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from this project will in no way

affect your academic standing. If you have any concerns about this research project, you may contact the Research Subject Line in the UBC Office of Research Services and Administration, at 604-822-8598.

If you would like further information, please feel free to contact me by telephone at 822-8943, by FAX at 822-4244, or by my e-mail address, lesley.andres@ubc.ca

I look forward to your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Lesley Andres
Associate Professor

York Letter

Dear x (personalized with student's name):

I am conducting a study to learn more about the first year experiences of Canadian and International undergraduate students attending York University. Information gained from the study can be used to help make York a better place in which to study.

As a first year student at York, your input in the study will be important, and I hope you will agree to participate by filling out the enclosed questionnaire, and returning it in the self-addressed and stamped envelope provided. This study is part of a larger three year research project on the first year student experience at four universities and is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

If you agree to participate I would like your permission to have the Institute for Social Research link information you provide in the questionnaire to information that the university has on matters like grades. I will assume that if you return the questionnaire you agree to this procedure.

I would like to assure you that any information that you provide will be kept strictly confidential and researchers will never be able to link your survey responses to your name. Only statistical summaries of information on all students participating in the study will be made public. In addition, you do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. I would also like to assure you that non-participation will have absolutely no implications for grades you receive in your courses.

If you have any questions about the study please contact me by e-mail at grayson@yorku.ca. You can also get in touch with Allison Collins at the

Office of Research Administration who can confirm that the study has been approved by York's research ethics committee.

You can find more information about this study on the ***Canadian and International Student Experience*** research site: *www.canises.com*. As soon as they are available, summaries of the findings and newsletters generated from this study, along with other useful information for students studying at Canadian universities, will be posted on this site.

Sincerely,

J. Paul Grayson,
Professor of Sociology

Dalhousie Letter

Dear Student (personalized with student's name):

Dalhousie University has agreed to participate in a **research study** to learn more about the first-year experiences of Canadian and international undergraduate students attending Dalhousie University. Information gained from the study can be used to help make Dalhousie a better place in which to study.

As a first-year student at Dalhousie, your input to the study will be important, and I hope that you will take a few minutes to fill out the enclosed questionnaire and return it in the self-addressed and stamped envelope provided. This study is part of a larger three-year research project on the first-year student experience at four universities and is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The responsible researcher at Dalhousie University is Dr Victor Thiessen of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology.

By completing the questionnaire you are giving your consent to the Registrar's Office at the University to furnish information from your student record, specifically grades, completed credits, major, birth date, TOEFL score and citizenship, on a confidential basis to the Institute for Social Research at York University, which is coordinating the study. This information and your responses to the questionnaire will be kept strictly confidential, and researchers will never be able to link your survey responses to your name. Only statistical summaries of coded information on all students participating in the study will be made public. In accordance with Dalhousie University policy all data will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet for five years, post publication.

Please note that you do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. I would also like to assure you that non-participation will have absolutely no implications for grades you receive in your courses.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Dr Victor Thiessen at 494-1254. In the event that you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, you may contact the Human Research Ethics/Integrity Coordinator at Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics and Integrity for assistance [Phone: 494-1462; E-Mail: patricia.lindley@dal.ca].

You can find more information about this study on the Canadian and International Student Experience research website: http:\\www.canises.com. As soon as they are available, summaries of the findings and newsletters generated from this study, along with other useful information for students studying at Canadian universities, will be posted on this site.

Yours sincerely,

Eric McKee
Vice-President, Student Services

McGill Letter

The University Experiences and Outcomes of International and Domestic Students

Researcher: Dr Janet Donald Tel: 514-398-6648
Professor
Centre for University Teaching and Learning
McGill University

<date>

Dear McGill Student (personalized with student's name),

I am conducting a study to learn more about the first year experiences of Canadian and International undergraduate students attending McGill University. As a first year student at McGill, you are a valuable source of information and I hope you will agree to participate. This study is part of a larger three year longitudinal research project on the experience of first year students at four Canadian universities. The research is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

I would like to invite you to participate in this project by filling out the enclosed questionnaire. If you agree to participate, your involvement will consist of filling out the questionnaire, which will take approximately 45 min, and returning it by mail in the stamped envelope provided. In 2005 and 2006, I will invite you to complete another questionnaire.

Also, I am interested in the relationship between students' experiences and matters like grades, and whether students return to the university to complete their studies. In addition to the information you provide on the questionnaire, we will be linking institutional records (including grade point average, number of credits earned, and TOEFL score if applicable) to questionnaire data. An ID number will be used to link the data; your name will **never** be used.

You can find information about this study on the ***International and Domestic Undergraduate Student*** research site www.canises.com. As soon as they are available, summaries of the findings and newsletters generated from this study, along with other useful information for students studying at Canadian universities, will be posted on this site.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you complete this questionnaire it will be assumed that your consent has been given. Please be assured that the data from the questionnaire will be treated in a confidential manner. You will not be identified by name on the questionnaire or in any reports or publications resulting from this project. During this study, you are entitled to receive answers to any questions that you may have. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time during this research project. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from this project will in no way affect your academic standing. If you have any concerns about this research project, you may contact me at 514-398-6648.

If you would like further information, please feel free to contact me by telephone, or by my e-mail address, janet.donald@mcgill.ca.

I look forward to your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Janet Donald

McGill Informed Consent Form

This is to state that I agree to participate in the research project entitled: **The University Experiences and Outcomes of International and Domestic Students Studying at Canadian Universities**
conducted by Professors Janet Donald of McGill University and Paul Grayson of York University.

I understand that the objective of this study is to identify the types of experiences inside and outside the university that different students have and to see how these experiences affect things like grades.

I understand by agreeing to participate in this survey I will be asked to complete questionnaires in the first, second and third year of a three year project, that information held by McGill University on my GPA, number of credits earned, and TOEFL score, if applicable, will be provided to the researchers. I understand that as a participant of the survey group I will be given a survey identification number and that this number will be provided to the researchers and not my name.

I understand that any information I provide will be kept strictly confidential by McGill University's Planning Office and that the researchers will never be able to link my responses to my name and only statistical summaries of information on all students participating in the study will be made public. In addition, I do not have to answer any questions I am not comfortable with.

I understand my participation in this agreement and freely consent and voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Name (please print)_____
Signature_____ Date_____

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