

THE PROGRAM

In Spring 2020, JMU Civic and students in a political science course co-created and co-implemented the campus-wide 2020 Census Education and Engagement Program. Four learning objectives² were created to capture how individuals should change as a result of participating in the program. Specifically, participation in the program was intended to facilitate students' ability to:

- Identify important purposes of the census.
- Recall the logistics for participating in the 2020 Census.
- Identify what kind of information is being obtained from individuals on the 2020 Census and laws pertaining to the use of personal information.
- Participate in and understand the value of the 2020 Census.

Implemented during an exceptionally chaotic and uncertain time, the program centered efforts on understanding and addressing motivational and informational barriers students face to completing the census. A range of tactics were deployed as part of the program including:

- in-person and virtual classroom visits by trained student-leaders equipped with educational materials on the census
- in-person and virtual town halls with experts
- bus advertisements
- door hangers used for canvassing high density off-campus housing complexes
- a strategically designed social media campaign
- tabling at key events and highly trafficked public spaces on campus
- campus-wide emails and text messages with critical information and direct links to the census online portal
- a global alert for one week in April 2020 in the university's course instructional tool system
- a global reminder from the Registrar to complete the 2020 Census when students were registering for Fall 2020 courses or checking in for May 2020 graduation

THE ASSESSMENT

Two measures were created for the program. The 15-item 2020 Census Assessment was created to assess the student learning objectives. The 2020 Census Program Participation Survey was developed to ascertain the extent to which students experienced and participated in activities developed for or promoted by the program.

THE PROCEDURES

The 2020 Census Assessment was administered twice: once in early February 2020 during Assessment Day (pretest) and again in late April 2020 (posttest). A total of 1,947 students with 45-70 credit hours going into the Spring 2020 semester completed the pretest during Assessment Day in February 2020. In April 2020 all students at JMU (about 20,000) were sent an email inviting them to take the 2020 Census Assessment and 2020 Census Program Participation Survey. Participation was voluntary. The number of

¹ A manuscript with more details about the program and its assessment is under review.

²The program had more than four learning objectives; this summary only addresses the four listed here.

students choosing to participate in the posttest administration was low, which might partly be attributable to the mass disruptions caused by COVID19. Only 162 students participated and of those, only 122 had pretest data.

THE RESULTS

What do students know and not know about the 2020 Census at pretest?

Findings from the 1,947 students at pretest indicate many students are aware of the purpose of the census, but also reveal a troubling number of students who don't know what information is being collected and how that information is used. The results also indicated most students are unclear about the logistics for participation. Students fared much better on questions about the purpose of the census.

To what extent does students' knowledge about the 2020 Census change over time?

Change over time in 2020 Census knowledge was explored using the pretest/posttest data. More students obtained the correct answer at posttest on almost all items, with statistically significant gains on the majority of items.

To what extent are students participating in activities developed for and promoted by the program?

Although operating during a chaotic information environment, many students reported receiving communications that were part of program. For instance, 79% reported receiving a university-wide email about the 2020 Census, 69% saw a social media post (which may or may not have been from JMU), 64% saw an alert on the primary learning management platform (Canvas) at JMU, and 56% noticed an alert on the administrative platform for students (MyMadison), where they can register for classes, manage financial aid, apply for graduation, etc. A little less than half (46%) received information from their professors, and about one-third or less received a university text message (35%). Students also reported discussing the 2020 Census with others. More students reported discussing the census with their families (68%) or roommates/friends (44%) than discussing with students in their classes (20%) (note, however, that class meetings moved to virtual-only format during this time).

Is change in knowledge about the 2020 Census related to participation in program activities?

Changes in knowledge were not associated with participation in program activities. Many program activities (e.g., emails, social media alerts) were designed to raise awareness and share resources, but did not require students to carefully digest or study the information provided in the resources. Although it is possible program activities designed to facilitate more meaningful engagement with informational materials increased knowledge, the study design did not permit quality assessment of such activities.

Did students complete the 2020 Census and is completion related to participation in program activities?

The ultimate goal of the program was to promote completion of the 2020 Census. In April of 2020, 57% of students in the pretest/posttest sample reported completion. This rate is encouraging given that it was based on data collected soon after the 2020 Census participation window opened and as students were inundated with messages about the global pandemic and needing to make alternative living arrangements.

Unlike knowledge, participation in particular activities was associated with 2020 Census completion. Some activities associated with census completion were part of the program (e.g., alerts on the university's administrative platform). Other activities associated with completion may or may not have been part of the program (e.g., social media alerts). Still other activities were heavily promoted by the program, but may or may not have occurred as a result of program participation (e.g., discussing census with others).

MOVING FORWARD

Many of the program elements that were easy to implement and able to reach a large number of students (e.g., emails, social media posts) were designed to increase awareness about the census, but may have limited utility in fostering meaningful changes in knowledge about the 2020 Census and logistics for participation. Program elements with the potential to alter such outcomes (e.g., participating in virtual classroom discussion, watching a video about the 2020 Census) were not as widespread and often relied on voluntary participation. We suspect these program elements affected knowledge and 2020 Census completion and regret not collecting data immediately before and after such activities to capture their effectiveness. Showcasing the effectiveness of such activities would provide a solid argument for their future implementation, ideally required of all students.

On the whole, results from the pretest administration strongly suggest the need for census education and engagement programming targeted to college students. Results also suggest that knowledge is malleable, providing further support for program development and implementation. In addition, our findings suggest that higher education can impact census completion and take a range of actions to support the census. We hope other colleges and universities consider implementing programming to increase knowledge about and participation in the next decennial census.