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**Electronic Communication with Students:
A Correlation with Participation in Supplemental Instruction**
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Abstract

Supplemental Instruction (SI) Leaders typically communicate with students through in-class announcements and postings. These traditional methods are now complemented with additional methods of electronic communication facilitated through the SI website. Our web-based method of communication includes the option for students to voluntarily receive e-mail updates from their SI Leader. This report summarizes the relationship between the e-mail updates and students' participation in Fall 2008 SI sessions.

Executive Summary

Purpose

Students have reported they would be more likely to attend SI sessions if they knew what would occur at the session. The purpose of this assessment is to determine the impact that receiving e-mail updates—which contain information about the content of SI sessions—has on students' participation in SI sessions.

Methodology

SI Leaders are able to post announcements, agendas, and resources (handouts, worksheets, or weblinks) on the SI website. In the middle of the spring 2008 semester, a website function was added through which students could voluntarily subscribe to receive e-mail updates about SI from their SI Leader. These updates contained the content of the announcements and agendas, or directed students to the website to retrieve a resource.

On the fall 2008 scheduling survey (administered the first week of classes), students were asked if they wished to be subscribed to these e-mail updates. The students indicating desire to receive the e-mails were asked to provide their ISU NetID. Students providing NetIDs were subscribed to the e-mail updates by the SI staff. (Note that students can also subscribe or unsubscribe themselves through the website.)

To assess the impact of these e-mails on SI participation, we performed correlations based on the relationships between the variable indicating whether a student did or did not receive the e-mail updates and the variables indicating:

- ◆ whether a student was an SI participant, and
- ◆ the total number of SI sessions attended.

These relationships were assessed using the Pearson correlation coefficient.

Findings

The relationship between receiving e-mail updates and participation in SI sessions shows a small positive correlation between the two variables ($r=.261, n=13,571, p<.01$).

The relationship between receiving e-mail updates and the total number of SI sessions attended shows a large positive correlation ($r=.625, n=13,571, p<.01$).

Discussion and Recommendations

The resulting positive correlations demonstrate the effectiveness of communicating electronically with students. Self-reported feedback from students provides additional support for the use of e-mail communication. In our end-of-semester student evaluation (administered November 2008), we asked “*How helpful were the e-mail updates you received about SI for this course?*” Students’ responses show:

The emails were...	SI Participants	Non-Participants
...very helpful or somewhat helpful	51.2%	25.6%
...neither helpful or unhelpful	18.0%	20.1%
...unhelpful	3.1%	5.0%
...not received	27.7%	49.3%

95.7% of the SI participants (and 90.2% of the non-participants) receiving the e-mails found them helpful. Hence, this student feedback demonstrates the e-mails are useful, but these results indicate there remains room to improve the e-mail communication quality and room to increase the number of students receiving the e-mails. Since SI Leaders control the frequency and content of the e-mails, we presume that any effort to improve the quality of our e-mail communication may have a positive impact on participation in SI.

Our experiences with the e-mail updates during the fall 2008 semester led to the following changes, implemented by the start of the spring 2009 semester:

- ◆ Improved clarity of the general e-mail text.
- ◆ Students who complete the web-version of the scheduling survey are immediately subscribed to the e-mail updates.
- ◆ For students who completed the paper surveys, we decreased the time to get the students into the e-mail update system. (Our changes allowed us to get all the e-mail update requests entered by the end of the first week, whereas the process took 3 weeks in fall 2008.)
- ◆ We retrained the SI Leaders on the use of the website.

Additional recommendations include:

- ◆ Continuing to gather feedback about the use of e-mails on the student program evaluation.
- ◆ Improving the clarity of the e-mail formatting as needed.
- ◆ Comparing the frequency of the e-mails to SI attendance patterns. (For example, are students more/less likely to participate if a Leader uses the e-mail updates on a weekly basis?)
- ◆ Reassessing additional reasons why students do not attend SI sessions, and developing ideas to address their concerns.