Solving School's Survey Request Overload

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Abstract

Limited information is available on strategies for managing the large number of survey requests that reach an individual nursing school. This article addresses problems identified in managing survey requests and describes the implementation and evaluation of a solution. Identified problems included the appearance of endorsing studies of varying quality and rigor, overlap and competition between external study requests and internal studies, respondent burden, and level of anonymity and confidentiality. The solution included a school-wide policy for tracking and vetting study requests before they were distributed. Evaluation data show the number of requests received (total, by month and source, by target population), their disposition (withdrawn, approved, not approved for distribution), and quality improvement data on meeting a 30-day target turnaround time. Additional considerations are also discussed.

Keywords

Research curriculum, research methods, survey research, research burden

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Surveying faculty, students, and/or staff in nursing schools is necessary to collect data needed to generate knowledge about research topics ranging from health behaviors to educational pedagogy. Although there is one published commentary acknowledging the problem of a Dean "drowning in survey requests" (Fjortoft & Gettig, 2017, p. 6870), we found no published articles describing strategies for managing the large number of survey requests that reach schools of nursing. The purpose of this report is to describe a Midwestern school's process for managing survey requests to decrease the burden on faculty, staff, and students. Specifically, the report contains information on the identified problem, creation of a policy solution, and evaluation metrics.

Problem Identification and Change Needed

The school of nursing receives multiple requests for assistance to recruit faculty, students, and/or staff to participate in various types of research studies. Requests arrive externally from other universities, externally from other schools at our university, and internally from within our school. The requests are typically sent via email to the Dean or to individual faculty, and are often simultaneously sent to several entities within the school. The Dean typically receives requests for approval to conduct the research within the school. Both the Dean and individual faculty receive requests to distribute information about the study to relevant populations. Due to the high volume of requests, the Dean began to delegate their management to the Associate Dean of Research. There were institutional policies in place for release of institutional data, but none concerning primary data collection. Within a few weeks, the Associate Dean identified several issues regarding lack of oversight of these requests.

The first issue noted was that without an established review process for requests, the

school leadership appeared to endorse studies of varying quality and rigor if they were distributed as requested. Emails that were forwarded to our internal listserves were being interpreted as evidence that the school was endorsing the research and in doing so, was encouraging people to participate. There were concerns that people may have felt pressure to participate in research, particularly when invitations were sent via email from the Dean or another administrator. Some studies were poorly conceptualized or operationalized, which led to concerns about their overall rigor – a particular problem when email invitations to participate were misinterpreted as the school endorsing poor quality research. However, there was no review of the quality and rigor of the research once a request was received. At the most basic level, there was no process to ensure requests were from legitimate sources and were not phishing or spam messages. Although some requests clearly came from known colleagues at well-known institutions or well-known organizations, in many cases, requests came from personal email addresses. Requests from student researchers did not always include a copy to a faculty mentor. Some studies did not include well operationalized study measures which made them burdensome and frustrating to complete. In addition, there was no process to determine whether studies had received the appropriate level of human subjects review and approval.

The second issue was related to overlap and competition between external requests (from individuals outside the university or within the university but outside the school) and internal requests (from individuals within the school). Our school is designated by the National League for Nursing as a Center of Excellence for creating and maintaining environments that promote the pedagogical expertise of faculty and staff and for advancing the science of nursing education. Thus, faculty in our school place a high value on nursing education research. Several faculty members lead research initiatives evaluating new methods of content delivery, new assessment

options, and new technologies. There was concern that the additional burden of external surveys

could decrease student response rates to post-test evaluations for internal projects. There was

also concern that responses to one study could interfere with responses to other studies (e.g.,

testing effects or assessment as intervention) (Gray, Grove, & Sutherland, 2017; Song & Ward,

2017).

A third issue was burden caused by the number of requests and their cyclical timing. The

number of surveys faculty and students were being invited to complete was unknown but seemed

high. Time faculty spent doing surveys was not consistent with our research strategic plan goal

of protecting faculty time to lead their own research. In addition, typically, requests seemed more

common between midterm and final exams of the fall and spring semester. In other words, if

there were 12 surveys, they were not equally distributed as one per month but more likely to be

six in the last eight weeks of each semester. Although there appeared to be a high volume of

requests generating concerns about burden, there was no system in place for tracking the timing

of incoming requests.

The fourth issue was related to the type of data being collected and whether it was

anonymous or confidential. Like other universities, there are strong policies about equity,

diversity, and inclusion in place at our school and university. There was interest in supporting

inclusive surveys and avoiding those that targeted one group to the exclusion of others. There

were also concerns about how investigators planned to report or use data if ours was the only

school being surveyed. There were instances where an external investigator wanted to survey

students only from our school on sensitive issues that would not typically be reported to outside

entities. It was not clear how those data would be used or reported once gathered.

A change was needed to address the aforementioned issues. Our overarching desire was

to support investigators in conducting research and scholarship when the study focus included

faculty, students, staff, and/or programs. Our goals were to engage in rigorous studies without

harming internal, ongoing studies, prevent undue burden and ensure studies were consistent with

university policies related to inclusion and confidentiality, and develop and maintain a system to

track survey requests.

Solution

Based on these multiple issues emerging over the span of a few months, a policy seemed

like a suitable solution. Research policies can address these types of ethical, legal, and practical

issues (Porter, 2005). The Associate Dean of Research enlisted the help of two groups to develop

a policy for managing incoming research request: the faculty governance research committee and

staff within the school's research support office. The research committee advocates for faculty in

addressing all matters related to research. The committee functions include advising the research

support office on policies and procedures. The committee consists of research center directors

and other faculty engaged in research (tenure track, tenured, clinical track). The policy received

several rounds of feedback from members of the faculty governance infrastructure, other faculty,

and staff.

Our policy included a statement of the scope, purpose, goals, and implementation steps.

The purpose was to support investigators in conducting research and scholarship when the study

focus included the school's faculty, students, and/or staff. We also included "programs" as a

study focus. For example, programs included when a program director or faculty in general were

sought to provide information about how much content on a particular topic was included in the

traditional BSN program. The stated goals in the policy were to help (a) promote rigorous

research and scholarship in these areas, (b) avoid overlap of studies which might influence study

results, (c) prevent undue burden on students, faculty, and/or staff, (d) ensure that studies are consistent with university policies related to inclusion and confidentiality of students, faculty, and staff, and (e) facilitate tracking for internal and external reporting.

The implementation steps were enacted by the research support office to ensure the policy was consistently applied. The steps are outlined in Figure 1. Briefly, the Principal Investigator (PI) is asked to submit their contact information, funding information, IRB approval documentation, and information about the study using an online data collection tool. The uploaded information is then reviewed by the faculty governance research committee. Guiding principles for the reviewers center on four elements: (1) Rigor: Are the study or project design and methods rigorous? Are rationale provided to support the researcher's interest in conducting the study or project in a particular setting at the school and the number of study sites (single site versus multiple sites)? Are the study or project outcomes appropriate? (2) Overlap: Would this study or project overlap with or confound ongoing research, projects, or education? (3) Burden: Is the population of interest already participating in an ongoing study? (4) Policies: Are participant and/or site responses anonymous or confidential? If our school is the only site involved in research being done by an external investigator, the study will not be approved. Reviewers briefly present their critique at the research committee meeting, there is a brief discussion, and the committee votes to approve, request modifications, or disapprove the study. A target of 30 days was set to complete the entire process. The research support office is committed to continuous quality improvement, and the policy and implementation steps have received several rounds of edits and approvals to increase clarity and efficiency.

Evaluation

Overall, there has been a large number of study requests that are unevenly distributed

throughout the year. Since beginning this effort in January of 2016, we have tracked 90 study requests. Of those, 74% arise from investigators at other universities, 12% from investigators in other schools at our university, and 13% from our own faculty. The number of survey requests by year was: 14 in 2016, 18 in 2017, 22 in 2018, 23 in 2019, and 13 in the first six months of 2020. The mean number of requests was 20 per year. As shown in Figure 2, requests were most common during the following four months: January, February, April, and November.

Figure 3 shows the number of requests by target population. The study requests are disproportionately burdensome to students and faculty compared to alumni. Requests to survey faculty only (6-10 requests per year) are on par with requests to survey students only (5-9 requests per year). These requests outnumber requests to survey both faculty and students (0-3 requests), both students and alumni (0-3 requests), or alumni only (0-1 request per year). No surveys targeted staff only, though 2 surveys in total have included staff with other target populations. For tracking simplicity, staff coded requests for program level data under the population category of "faculty", as faculty are in the best position to provide the information being sought.

Data suggest that our process has reduced the number and burden of surveys sent to our faculty, students, and staff. In addition, studies that are not highly relevant or those that are insufficiently rigorous are disapproved, rather than automatically distributed. Figure 4 shows the disposition of the study requests as a percentage of the yearly total. Some requests are withdrawn by PIs once the policy is explained to them (36% to 46%). Some possible reasons for withdrawal are that the study is not IRB approved, the burden of responding to the information request is too high, or the timeline for approval is not acceptable. Of the total each year, 15%-44% of study requests are approved and 11%-31% are not approved. In 2018, we instituted a pre-screening

process where single site (our school only) requests were filtered out as not meeting criteria for

approval. This screening process led to 18% of requests in 2018 and 8%-9% in 2019 and the first

half of 2020 being excluded from the review process.

We are approaching our target of a 30-day review from time of request to communication

of the review committee's determination. The turnaround time was less than 30 days for 70% of

reviewed requests and less than 45 days for 90%. The remaining 10% took 59 to 80 days to

process, primarily due to delays in investigators submitting their information for review.

Additional work will be needed to meet our target.
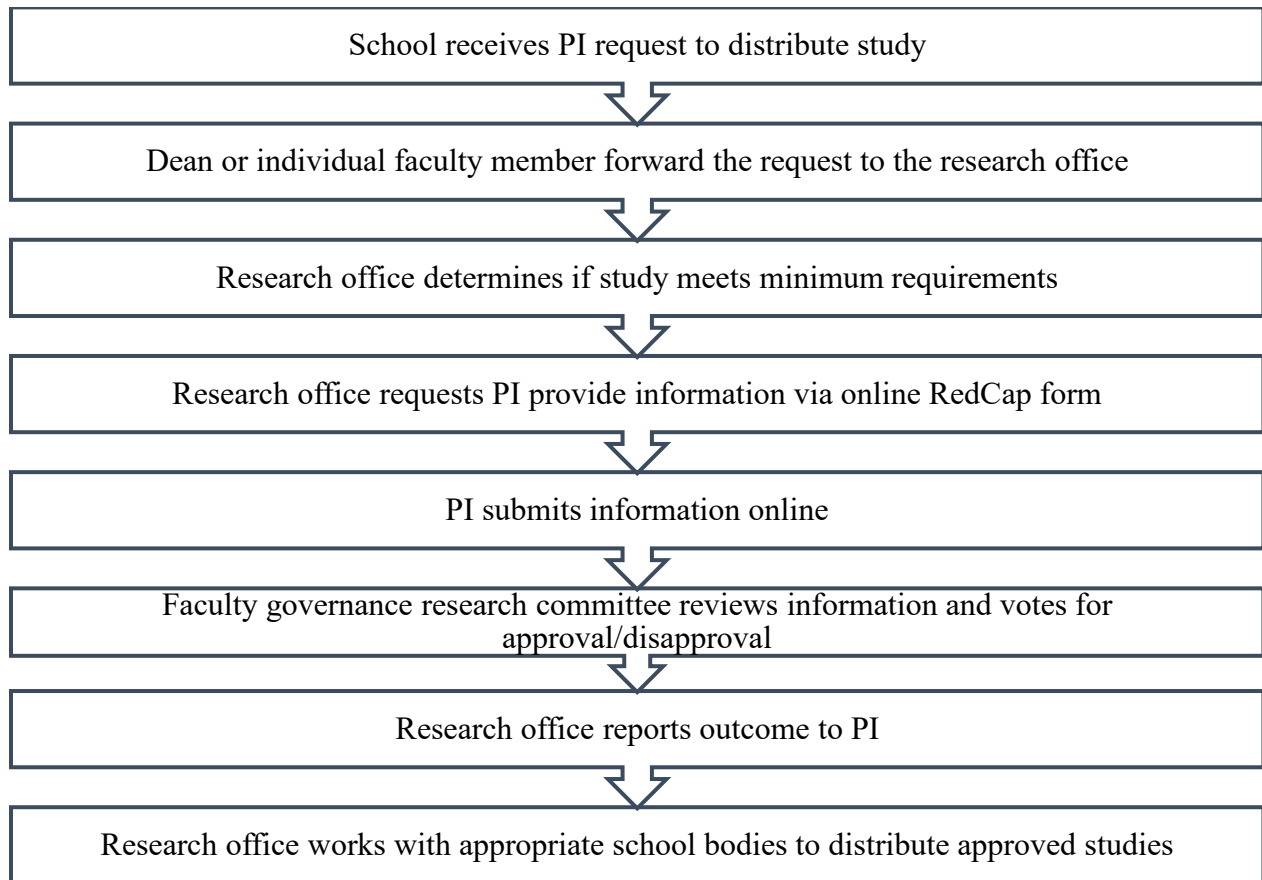
Conclusions

A solution was implemented and evaluated to reduce the high burden of managing and

responding to numerous incoming study requests from sources external to our university,

external to our school, and internal to our school. We were somewhat surprised at the number of

requests that reached our school. Our faculty governance research committee's hypothesis is that

our school may be disproportionately targeted for two reasons: the aforementioned dual NLN

designations and active emeriti faculty. Emeriti faculty visibility and perhaps encouragement

may increase connections between external researchers desiring to conduct surveys at our school.

There are some strengths and weaknesses in this project. The formulation and

implementation of the solution were done with iterative feedback from faculty as well as staff.

Concerns were acknowledged and acted upon with the result being a faculty governance

approved policy and research support office approved set of implementation steps. By

embedding the solution in the faculty governance communication structure, faculty had greater

awareness of the policy. This resulted in faculty contacting the research office when survey

requests were sent directly to them and did not go through our approval process. Data were (1)

carefully and prospectively tracked with each incoming study request and (2) linked to clear and specific goals to use in the evaluation. However, data tracking did not include time or costs related to faculty and staff time in developing or implementing the solution nor any feedback from persons submitting survey requests to the school. In more time- or cost-restrictive environments, a less onerous process or flat refusal to distribute surveys might be a more appropriate solution. In addition, the policy does not prevent study requests that are sent directly to faculty email addresses. Overall, the solution and tracking system outlined above were beneficial and could easily be implemented by others seeking an alternative to ignoring or refusing to distribute study requests.

References

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Figure 1

Policy Implementation Flow Diagram

School receives PI request to distribute study
Dean or individual faculty member forward the request to the research office
Research office determines if study meets minimum requirements
Research office requests PI provide information via online RedCap form
PI submits information online
Faculty governance research committee reviews information and votes for approval/disapproval
Research office reports outcome to PI
Research office works with appropriate school bodies to distribute approved studies

Note. Figure shows the steps involved in processing incoming study requests. All steps are logged into a tracking system.
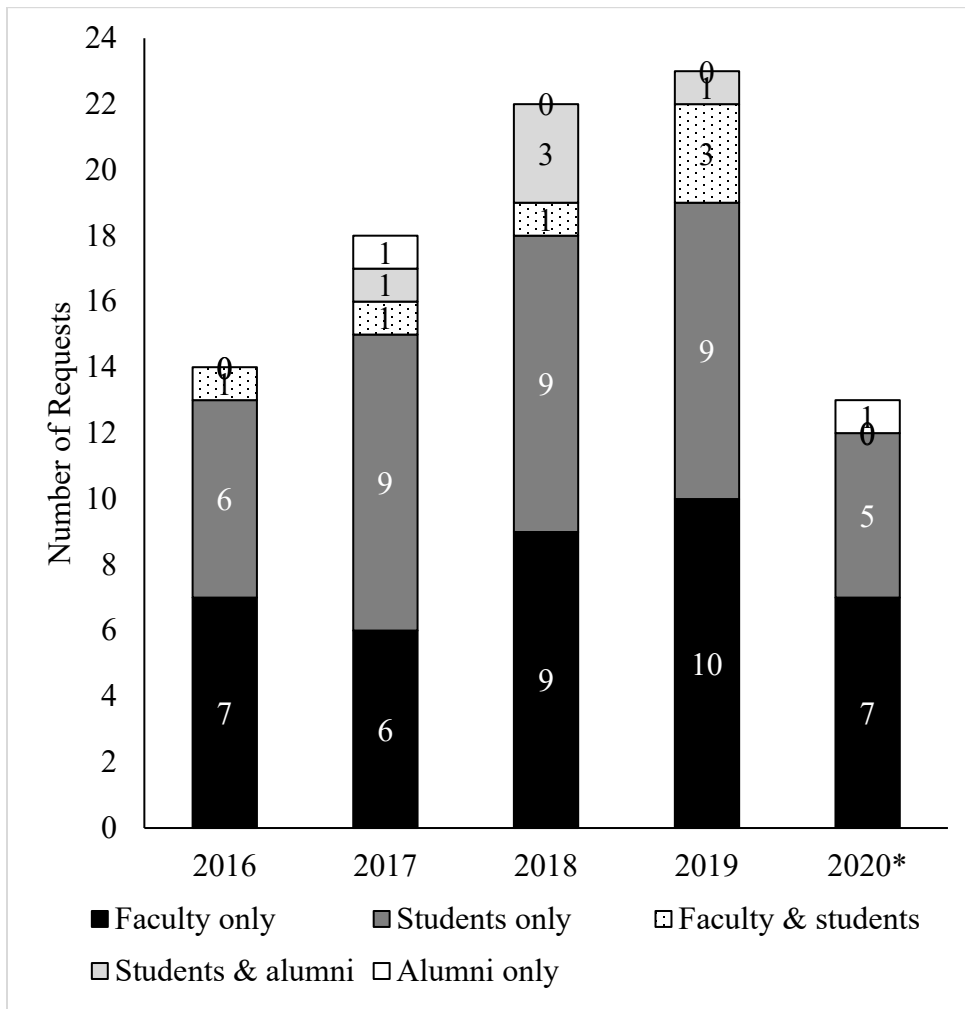
Figure 2

Number of Study Requests by Source and Month 2016-2019
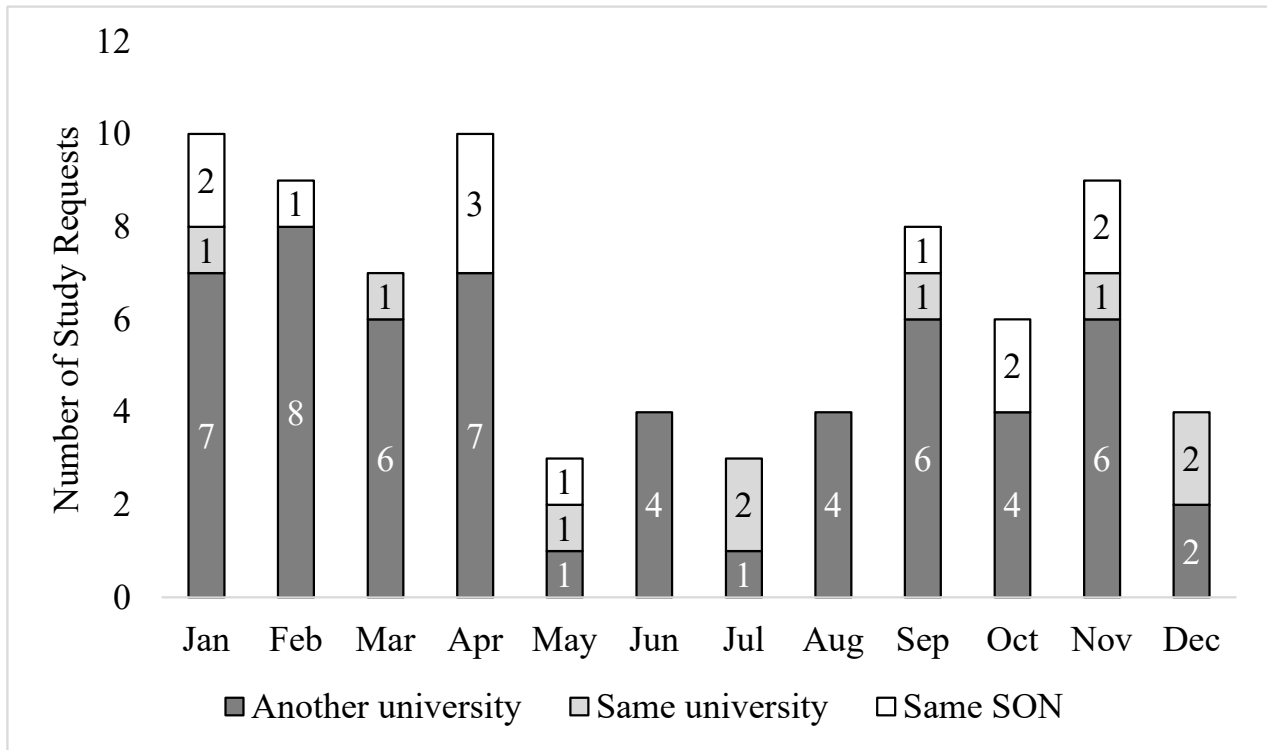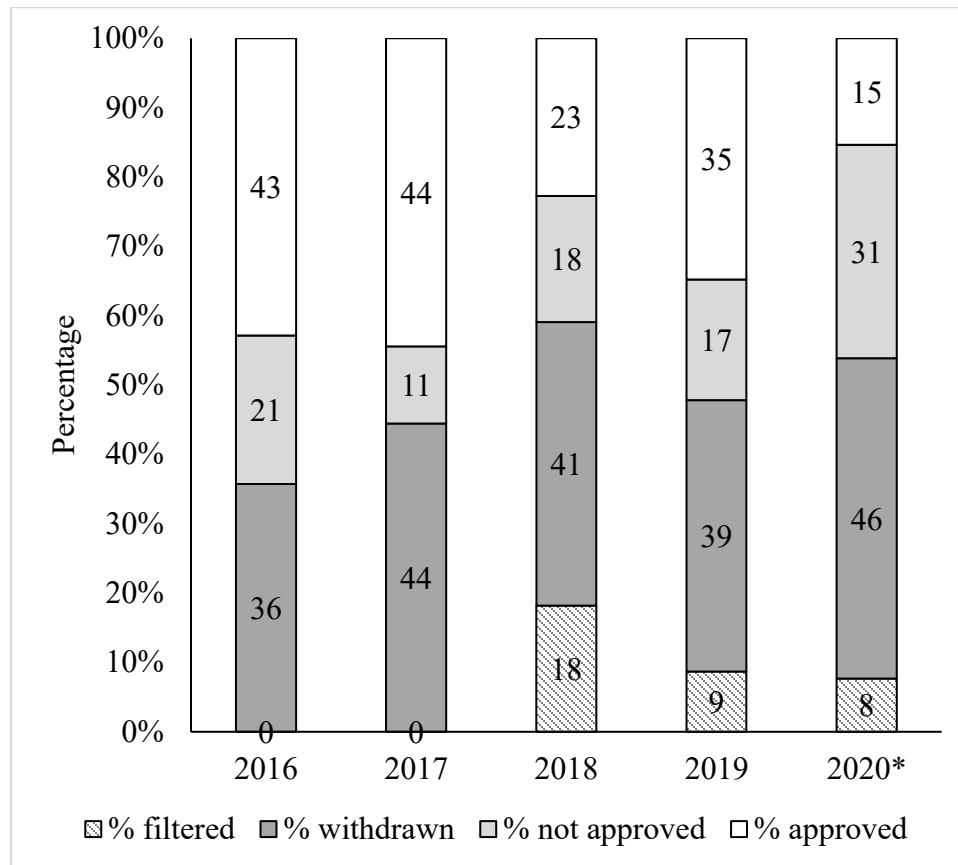
Figure 3

Number of Study Requests by Year and Target Population 2016-2020*

*2020 data are for the first 6 months only.

Figure 4

Disposition of Study Requests by Year Shown as Percentage of Yearly Total 2016-2020*

*2020 data are for the first 6 months only. Numbers shown are percentages of the total number

of requests each year. Filtered refers to studies that did not meet minimum requirements and

thus, did not advance to review. Withdrawn refers to studies that the PI withdrew from

consideration. Not approved are those that advanced to review but were not approved by

committee for distribution. Approved are those that advanced to review and were approved for

distribution.