University of Vermont

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Compliance

October 31, 2025

Dear Research Colleagues,

We are writing to inform you of a recent uptick in fraudulent activity affecting survey-based research that reimburses participants through the issuance of electronic payments, often referred to as "eGift cards" or "digital rewards." This issue compromises financial resources but also may affect the integrity of your research data. It is important that we take proactive steps to mitigate these risks.

What's Happening:

Nationally, institutions are finding survey research fraud is increasing with digital rewards, as financial incentives attract bots and bad actors who submit false responses for compensation. This threatens both data integrity and budgets; although financial fraud is alarming, compromised data quality is equally important.

How Can You Protect Yourself and Your Data

To safeguard your research and institutional assets, here are some requirements and some best practices for surveys that will reduce both data integrity and financial fraud risks.

Required Practices for Surveys That Compensate Participants

- **Select survey platforms** with fraud prevention features. UVM has licensing agreements with **Qualtrics** and **RedCap**. Both platforms include additional security features such as bot and duplicate detection. While UVM does not require that PI's exclusively use Qualtrics or RedCap, if survey respondents are going to be receiving any sort of electronic or digital payment, you are required to use a platform that provides additional security features. Qualtrics Fraud Detection can be found here

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and you should contact UVM's RedCap administrator directly for questions about how to enable RedCap's fraud prevention features.

- **Use CAPTCHA / reCAPTCHA and Attention and Consistency Checks** in your survey. These help filter out bots and inattentive respondents. Both Qualtrics and RedCap offer this functionality.
- **Disable the back button** to reduce the risk that participants can submit multiple responses.

Researcher Responsibilities

- **Validate Data Before Submission**: Review survey responses for red flags (e.g., repeated answers, suspicious email addresses) before submitting payee reward lists to the Disbursement Center.
- **Second-Person Review**: Ensure that a second individual validates the reward list before submission.
- **Budget Controls**: Load funds in smaller increments (e.g., $2,000–$5,000) to limit the amount that could be paid out due to fraud. Loading funds over $5,000 may require additional review and approval.
- **Internet Search**: Perform a search of the survey URL and of specific questions or unique survey phrases to determine whether the survey has been republished before additional funds are requested.
- **Continuous Review**: If your survey is ongoing, review data continuously—not just at the end.
- **Physical Payments**: Consider alternatives to digital rewards.

Budget Impacts

Per UVM's Cost Policy on Sponsored Agreements, any unallowable costs, which include those resulting from fraudulent charges, cannot be charged to the sponsor. That means these charges are the responsibility of the department and charges for fraudulent surveys will result in the department being required to cover these costs. Taking steps described here will reduce the risk of fraud and will also maintain data integrity.

Additional Guidance

Johns Hopkins has published a comprehensive guide on fraud prevention in survey instruments, which includes design tips, participant verification strategies, and input validation techniques. Until UVM has finalized our own guide, this is a good publicly available option to use. You can access it here.

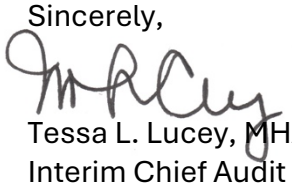
Next Steps

We will be following up with additional guidance, instructions, and templates to reduce the risk of fraud while continuing to support the ongoing use of digital rewards.

- If you have questions or need assistance related to US Bank Focus Blue and Rewards, please visit the Division of Finance, Focus Blue and Rewards Card website.
- If you have questions related to Qualtrics, contact the Tech Team Help Line. If you have questions about, REDCap, contact the RedCap administrator.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your continued commitment to research integrity and financial stewardship.

Sincerely,



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