

BASICS FOR CONDUCTING A SURVEY

1. Do you need a survey?

Use a survey only if it is the only way to get the data. Survey responses may be “wrong.” Do those who respond represent the entire group? Did respondents really read the question, or just select an answer to quickly finish the survey? Some ways to minimize these problems are below.

- **Why DO YOU WANT TO ASK?**

The most important step in a survey is figuring out what you actually want to know. It’s important to make your objectives really clear up front or the next steps of survey formation won’t go so well.

What decision do you need to make or behavior do you need to change based on the feedback you get from your survey?

- **ONLY ASK QUESTIONS THAT GIVE YOU ANSWERS YOU CAN ACT On.**

Ask questions that give you actionable data so you can do something with the results, and be prepared to make some radical shifts based on the data you receive – not just the data you hope to get.

The questions you choose to ask should ultimately provide you with the information you need to measure your goal. If you can’t do something with the information, don’t measure it!

2. A survey is more than just compiling a list of questions.

- **Does the question mean the same thing to you as it does to those who will take the survey?**

Are these statements the same?

Faculty know my name.

Staff know my name.

The correct answer – for a student – probably is “Yes”! Students often use Faculty and Staff interchangeably.

Do not assume that students use language the same way you do. Another example: Students often think that if they return for a degree after earning an A.S. that they will earn a “Graduate degree.”

YOU NEED TO PILOT TEST YOUR SURVEY. You cannot be sure that your responses are accurate if you do not have representatives from your target audience talk through the survey with you. What do they think questions/words mean? Do choices for multiple choice questions given them unique choices that include all possibilities?

- **Tips for writing questions**

Define segments of a scale rather than “on a scale of 1 to 5 ...”

Words are easier for people to think about than numbers. So that means don't ask your survey-takers to rate how happy they are on a scale of 1 to 5. Ask them if they're extremely happy, very happy, moderately happy, slightly happy, or not at all happy.

Don't write Double-Barreled Questions.

Double-barreled questions ask two questions at once. In a survey multiple ideas presented at the same time inhibits a useful response.

Example: Were Orientation staff helpful and friendly?

What if staff were helpful, but not friendly? Or staff were friendly, but could not answer any questions? How can the student answer if response choices are “Agree/Disagree”?

Make the survey “Flow”

A good survey should flow in an orderly fashion, help to stimulate recall (if necessary); and motivate the respondent to reply.

Start with the most general question. Generally it should be a multiple choice question.

Narrow the topic for later questions. Group related questions together.

Generally put open-ended questions at or near the end of the survey. Questions that respondents may find difficult to answer, including personal/demographic questions, should also be at or near the end of the survey.

3. Develop a plan to maximize the response rate.

How will individuals be contacted about the survey?

When is the best time to contact potential participants? Consider “competing” activities and demands on the recipient's time.

If mail or e-mail surveys are used, all of the following strategies should be considered:

- An advance letter;

- Follow-up contacts or reminders to complete the survey.

- Emphasizing survey sponsorship and the benefit to the participant from the collected data;

- Personalizing correspondence;

- Use of incentives for completion of the survey.

Follow-up: Plan to send a reminder 2 days after the initial request to complete the survey.

Research has shown that the most responses are received with this system.

Emphasizing survey sponsorship: Can you legitimately say that a particular person or organization wants this information? Will this encourage people to reply to the survey?

Resources

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Many of the items on the previous pages were from web pages, including the ones below.

Blog posts about specific Survey Situations

- **Survey introduction items to increase responses**
<https://surveyanyplace.com/survey-introduction-examples/>
- How **the order of questions** affects responses
<https://www.surveygizmo.com/resources/blog/survey-question-order/>
- **“Required questions”: the downsides**
(Historically most Mercy respondents answer questions even if they are not required.)
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/blog/2016/08/29/make-survey-questions-required/>
- **True answers to questions**, rather than just a response
https://cdn.smassets.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Satisficing-Survey-Guide.pdf?ut_source=blog&ut_source2=satisficing_surveys&ut_source3=inner_cta
- **Better choices than “Agree/Disagree”**
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/blog/2016/12/21/lets-agree-not-use-agreedisagree-questions/>

Other resources about survey design

- Harvard University:
https://psr.iq.harvard.edu/files/psr/files/PSRQuestionnaireTipSheet_0.pdf
- General survey design
<https://zapier.com/learn/forms-surveys/writing-effective-survey/>

See the following pages for:

The difference between **anonymous**, **confidential**, and **non-confidential** surveys.

Reasons why a survey might need approval from an Institutional Review Board

Information to consider when developing a survey and reporting results

A. **Anonymous, confidential, and non-confidential** surveys defined

There are three types of surveys: **anonymous, confidential, and non-confidential**.

Anonymous surveys are those that do not collect any identifying information. Identifying information is anything that could be used to identify a student. Names, student ID numbers, and email addresses are all considered identifying information. Similarly, combinations of data that could be used together to identify a student can be considered identifying information. For example, an anonymous survey could ask for a student's gender, home state/country, major, *or* ethnicity; however, if a survey asks for all four, and the four items could be used together to identify a participant, the survey is no longer anonymous.

Confidential surveys do ask identifying information. These types of surveys are extremely useful, since the identifier can be used to link information from your survey to other identified data (i.e., demographics, previous surveys). This type of survey is also useful for before-and-after studies. By having an identifier, you can explore the ways in which the individuals in your study changed over time. Because confidential surveys contain identifying information, considerable thought needs to be put into a plan to securely store your data in order to keep the responses confidential.

The final type of study, **non-confidential**, is one that collects identifying information with no guarantee of confidentiality. This type of survey is not recommended, as students are much less likely to respond if they do not feel that their data will be kept in confidence.

For all surveys you will need to explain to your participants whether their data will be anonymous, confidential or non-confidential. If you choose to conduct a confidential survey, you will need to further explain how you plan to secure your data and how long you plan to keep your data.

B. Does Your Survey Research Need Approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB)?

If your survey research is a "systematic investigation including research development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to **generalizable knowledge**," and involves **human subjects**, then approval by an IRB is necessary.

Decision charts: <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/decision-charts/index.html>

Regulations and FAQ: <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance>

To assess whether your survey meets the definition of "research involving human subjects," please consider the following:

- *Human subjects* is defined as: a "living individual about whom an investigator conducting research obtains data through intervention or interaction with the individual or obtains identifiable private information."
- *Generalizable knowledge* is defined as knowledge designed to derive general conclusions from particulars, and is a goal of most research. An essential consideration is whether it was the original intent of the investigator to contribute to generalizable knowledge. Some activities that involve interactions with humans and data gathering may not fit the definition of research with human subjects, since they are designed to accomplish something else, such as in-house quality improvement. For example, a survey of college students about their university's counseling services may be designed strictly to improve service delivery for students, thus not involve research.

However, should the surveyors believe that the results may be generalizable, they should request IRB review BEFORE they initiate the survey.

Publication of results is sometimes used as a measure of whether research is generalizable, but it is important to note that: (1) not every study will produce results worthy of publication; and (2) there are multiple ways in which results can be made available to others without being published in a peer-reviewed journal (e.g., conference presentations or websites).

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING ONLINE SURVEYS

- Online surveys should allow "no response" as an option for every question. That is, a survey design where one cannot proceed without answering the question is in violation of the respondent's right to withhold information.
- Sensitive data must be protected as it moves along communication pathways between computers. If using a commercial site (e.g., Zoomerang) the researcher should review the site's security measures for protecting respondent privacy and data confidentiality.
- The researcher's agreement with the commercial site should include specific provisions about how, and for how long, it will store the data.

**Content compiled from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) and the Code of Federal Regulations, 45 CFR 46*