Session 1: The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly: How to Design & Implement a Good Survey  
February 12, 2015 – 1:00-2:00 p.m. – ITDC Commons

Reasons for Doing a Survey
1. Before starting any survey, ask: “Do I need to do a survey to get this information?” If the answer is no, then you don’t need to administer a survey.
2. Before starting any survey, ask: “Is the information I need already available?” If the answer is yes, then you don’t need to administer a survey.
3. Satisfying curiosity is not a good reason for conducting a survey in the context of program evaluation. However, a survey is acceptable in the context of academic or empirical research.
4. Surveys should only be conducted when asking people is the only way to get information you need.

Getting Organized
5. Set up a project plan or checklist for your survey. Use a timeline.
6. Make a list of everyone or every office impacted by a survey and include them in the process.
7. Consult with subject-matter experts in evaluation, research-design, and survey-design (or become one yourself).
8. Technical aptitude with computers or networking does not mean an individual is adept at designing surveys. Survey design, data analysis, and web design are very different skill sets.
   1) If a question is confusing, ask the pilot-takers to rephrase the question in their own words.
   2) Try to select people who are similar to your population or sample.
10. Check with the IRB office.
11. Consider the pros and cons of standardized surveys vs designing and implementing your own.

Survey Design
12. You should almost always include these items in the introduction of a survey:
   1) Who is doing the survey (where it’s from)
   2) Why the survey is being conducted
   3) How the results will be used
   4) Promise of confidentiality or anonymity, but only if you can really promise it.
   5) Other (optional): How long the survey will take, incentives, contact info.
13. Questions about knowledge should come first because 1) they are easier and 2) they can be used to screen out attitude and behavior questions. Move sensitive and threatening questions to the end of the survey.
14. Make the first questions easy and applicable to as many people as possible. Otherwise, they will conclude the survey does not apply to them and give up.
15. Keep demographic questions at the end, unless you want to screen.
16. If you have an identifier from students (like a ULID) this may make some questions unnecessary (like demographics) and make it easy to link to other university data sources.
17. Number questions.
18. Try to avoid horizontal alignment of responses (______ male __________ female).
19. Avoid split responses on separate pages.
20. Have consistent branding and imaging.
21. Print on one side only. People miss the second side (unless it is obvious).
22. Try to avoid a staple in paper surveys – it implies a long length.
23. Proofread!
Writing Questions

24. Every time you write a question, ask yourself “Why do I want to know this?” (See principle #3)
25. Don’t force people to provide information they don’t have. It is okay to use prompts to aid in recall.
26. Loaded or leading questions provide loaded results. Watch for your own biases in writing questions.
27. Avoid double-barreled questions.
28. Avoid abbreviations and obscure words. Do not use special words or acronyms that not everyone can understand.
29. Try to avoid non-specific questions that could have multiple meanings for different people. They are either too dependent on one’s frame of reference, or require the respondent to make assumptions about what other’s think or feel.
30. When asking sensitive questions about behavior that may make the respondent feel threatened, use a long time frame or normalize the question.
31. Try to keep answer ranges simple.
32. Categories should be exhaustive.
33. Use open-ended questions sparingly, and don’t ask an open-ended question if you don’t need to (like age).
34. Avoid wording that has subjective or vague meaning.
35. Keep anchors the same.
36. For infrequent and irregular behaviors, people will count when given a short time period (“how many times did you put gas in your car in the last two weeks?”) A longer time frame (the last month) means people will just take the shorter time frame and multiply. If the behavior is regular, then people will just retrieve frequency from their stored memory (brushing teeth).
37. Avoid “not” – it can be confusing. Use “never” and “always” sparingly.
38. Questions about attitude can be difficult because there are no true answers, and attitudes cannot be observed. With behavioral questions, people will estimate when asked about frequencies for regular behaviors, but will attempt to count in regard to questions about irregular behaviors.
39. Use the same scales in the question and response options and make sure the responses match the question.
40. Social desirability is the idea that people want to look good, even in anonymous surveys:
   1) Start with the “negative” in your answer selections (“strongly disagree” first, for example).
   2) Reduce the threat of making a respondent feel inferior by qualifying an answer “Do you happen to know...” or “can you recall, offhand...”
   3) Include a “don’t know” response. This will make the respondent feel like they are not alone in “not knowing” and reduce guessing.
   4) Be careful that questions do not unduly impact responses on other questions.
41. When conducting surveys asking about opinions and attitudes, it is a good idea to get respondents to indicate how strongly they feel about the issue.

Resources


*Internet, Phone, Mail, & Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 2014, by D.A. Dillman, J.D. Smith, & L.M. Christian
Ideas for Increasing Response Rates
Make the survey simple, concise, and easy to complete.

Ask only what you need to know, not what you want to know.

Personalize requests and communications.

Use a trusted and well-known source for communications. It is preferable to use your organization’s letterhead and brand.

Use multiple follow-ups.

The evidence on incentives is mixed, but they probably don’t hurt. Research shows that people respond to immediate rewards ($1 immediately produces higher response rates than $5 later). So focus on pre-paid incentives. This also establishes trust.

Make the respondent feel like they are in control. People do not like to feel subordinated.

Remove barriers to completion (as identified through your pilot).

Consider a variety of mixed methods in terms of administration (online, mail, etc.).

Be public and explicit in communications with your population in terms of how results are used.

Send an advance letter or email.

Remove unnecessary questions.

Consider timing. Sending students a survey the Tuesday before Thanksgiving is not a good time.

What to do if the Response Rate is Low
Acknowledge the response rate is low. Be clear that the results only apply to those who responded, not the entire population.

Don’t say “our students feel this way...” or “this data proves...” Rather, be suggestive with language “Based on the students who responded to this survey...” or “These data seems to suggest that...”

Focus on the conversation and dialog, as opposed to the results.

Try to avoid inferential statistics. Focus on the descriptive statistics (average, sum, etc.).

If the response rate is low, try to compare the demographics of the response sample compared with the overall population. The more similar they are, the more confidence you have that the data represent your population.