

# Asking Demographic Questions in Surveys

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## Introduction

This document addresses demographic survey questions and provides examples. Please contact University Assessment Services if you have additional questions.

See the University Assessment Services [survey checklist](#) for more principles about survey design and use of results.

Examples can be viewed online on a Qualtrics [preview link](#). Contact University Assessment Services at [assessment@ilstu.edu](mailto:assessment@ilstu.edu) for access to the Qualtrics survey.

## Principles

- Before including demographic questions, the researcher should clarify why need demographic data at all.<sup>1</sup> The only justifiable reason to ask demographic questions is if the researcher is prepared to act on the results. If demographic data about respondents will not address the goals of the survey, respondents shouldn't be asked.
- Clearly articulate to respondents why demographic questions are being asked.
- Demographic questions should never be "forced response." Respondents should be aware that demographic questions are optional and be able to proceed with the survey without answering the question at all.
- Demographic questions should generally be placed at the end of a survey. Demographic questions can be included towards the beginning of a survey if used for screening.
- Consider what steps will be taken to protect the anonymity or confidentiality of the results.<sup>2</sup>
- Always report demographic responses in summary format only. Best practice suggests that results by demographic should not be shared if the number is less than 5. However, the higher the better.<sup>3</sup>
- Demographic questions should be exhaustive.<sup>4</sup>
- Unless there is a good reason, make demographic questions optional.
- Use a "select all that apply" option for demographic questions.
- Pilot survey with a similar population. Or, consider a panel or informal group of experts or colleagues to review the survey.
- Avoid using "other" in demographic questions. Rather, state "Another option not listed here (please specify):" This lets respondents know the researcher acknowledges the limitations of collecting demographic information from surveys.
- Place demographic response options in alphabetic order.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Frederick, January 2021

<sup>2</sup> Difference between confidentiality and anonymity: [Qualtrics, Anonymous vs Confidential Surveys](#) and [Evergreen State University](#).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see Frederick, April 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Example: "What type of family did you grow up in?: One father and one mother; one mother; one father." Solution: "Grandparents, foster family, two parents (father and mother), two mothers, two fathers, other:"

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- Some surveys ask individuals to indicate if there is any aspect of their identity the survey missed.<sup>5</sup>
- Vertically align demographic response categories. Horizontal alignment can lead to respondents selecting the incorrect demographic category.
- Be aware of context. For example, a survey administered in a region with a high Hmong population may split the Asian demographic category into two: Asian and Southeast Asian.
- Avoid normative responses. For example, use “first-year student” instead of “freshman.”
- Avoid acronyms. For example, use “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” instead of “NHOPI.”
- Ensure demographic questions avoid bias.<sup>6</sup>

## References / Additional Information

American College Personnel Association. (2013). [\*ACPA Standards for Demographic Questions\*](#).

Fernandez, T., et. al (2016). [\*More Comprehensive and Inclusive Approaches to Demographic Data Collection\*](#). School of Engineering Education, Purdue University.

Frederick, J. (2020, November). [\*Three Considerations for Inclusively and Responsibly Analyzing and Reporting on Demographics\*](#). Ithaka S-R.

Frederick, J. (2021, January). [\*When to Ask \(or Not Ask\) Demographic Questions\*](#). Ithaka S-R.

Frederick, J. (2021, April). [\*Three Considerations for Inclusively and Responsibly Analyzing and Reporting on Demographics\*](#). Ithaka S-R.

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<sup>5</sup> Example: Is there any aspect of your identity that we have not covered in the preceding questions that we may want to consider including in future studies? Please use the space below. Question from Frederick, J. (2020, November). [\*Four Strategies for Crafting Inclusive and Effective Demographic Questions\*](#). Ithaka S-R.

<sup>6</sup> Biased survey questions are: 1) offensive to certain groups and 2) unfairly penalize individuals based on their representation. Examples: Depictions of people in stereotypical manners, assuming individuals represent or speak for a group, or language that can be interpreted in an offensive or emotionally charged manner.