



SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES: DO THEY MEASURE UP?

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One of the most used and abused assessment methods is the locally developed survey. Surveys are conducted of students, faculty, recruiters, employers, alumni and other important constituent groups. But what constitutes an effective survey? The results will only be as good as the planning and quality of the survey instrument. Here are some tips to effective surveying:

Plan ahead

Objectivity is especially important in survey development. Plan the survey carefully to reduce the likelihood of bias in questions asked or the group surveyed. Focus clearly on the key questions you want answered and confirm that the survey recipients can adequately provide the answers. If the survey developer does not have experience in survey construction, have the survey reviewed by someone with the appropriate expertise. Decide whether you will need to survey a population (e.g., everyone in the study group) or if a sample (i.e., a purposeful selection representative of the study group) will meet your needs.

Construct survey items carefully

There are many different formats available for survey items. It is important to construct items that are clearly understood. Keep items short and to the point. Compound (single items that contain more than one question) or complex questions are confusing and make responses difficult to interpret. Avoid loaded and/or leading questions (e.g., "How do you think we can improve our laboratories?").

Pilot test the survey

Once the survey has been completed, ask a small group representative of the population to be studied to take the survey. If you are surveying students, have a select few take the survey. (Of course, pizza is a must!) Then, conduct a focus group to identify any concerns they might have about the survey. If you are surveying alumni, get a group of graduate students who were undergraduates in the program. Be creative in how to effectively "test" the survey for clarity and relevance.

Maximize the likelihood of response

Most surveys are now administered electronically using a commercial survey platform. If the survey is well-planned, it will be direct and clear, and the study group will be appropriate. Keep the instrument short. If the survey must be lengthy, consider creating two versions and giving half to one part of the study group and other half to the remaining subjects in the group, being sure that the demographics of the two groups are the same. Although this will take forethought, it will likely increase the response rate. When using a commercial survey platform, you will have lots of options to customize your survey. Features such as skip logic and matrix format will enable you to be efficient in the administration of your survey. It is also recommended that someone the target group knows send out the link to the survey and request a response (e.g., a former program academic advisor, popular instructor or chairperson). The farther away in social or professional relationship from the target group, the less likely the recipients will

respond. For example, a student may respond if asked by their faculty advisor rather than the dean of the college. No matter how well the survey is constructed, if respondents do not complete the survey, it won't be helpful.

Analyze survey results appropriately

Remember, this is not social science research in the truest sense. In many cases, descriptive statistics are all you need to use for analysis. If there are open-ended questions, a thematic analysisⁱ would be appropriate. You may choose to show your results by cohort groups or for different years, but generally, sophisticated statistical analysis is not required.

Report and evaluate findings

Although this step is the least time consuming, it is one of the most important aspects of the process. If it is assumed that the survey instrument has been carefully constructed, pilot tested, administered and analyzed, then how and to whom the results are reported becomes critical. Reports should be easy for a layperson to read and presented with an executive summary. Statistical jargon should be avoided. Where appropriate, implications of the findings should be clearly articulated. Reports should be made to those most directly affected by the results and who are able to evaluate the findings and act on any recommendations made.

ⁱ Thematic analysis closely examines the data to identify common themes — topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly.