Survey Research FAQ’s

(Adapted from the book Conducting Community-Impact Studies A Handbook for Community Colleges – J. Frank Armijo, Sidney S. Micek, Edward M. Cooper; 1978 as well as best practices of Institutional Research Offices at the College and District)

Are there any basics principles for surveys?

Focus: Clarify the question(s) you want the survey questions/responses to address. Taking the time to clearly identify what you want to learn will help you test each question to make sure it provides you with relevant information.

Voluntary Participation: The survey must include a statement informing people that their participation is voluntary; that they can choose not to participate, can skip any questions, or can exit the survey before completing it.

Privacy and confidentiality: Since you are collecting unitary-level data, you need to be very concerned with the privacy of the data you are collecting and analyzing (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act – FERPA has strict guidelines on the accessibility of information). The survey must include a statement assuring the respondents confidentiality and that their responses will be combined with the responses of others to ensure that an individual respondent cannot be identified.

In order to ensure confidentiality of the respondents:

1) You must not collect any identifying information such as Student ID, Social Security Number, Driver’s License Number or any other piece of information on the survey that could personally identify a respondent.

2) You will also need to store the information collected so you as the researcher can control the contents and accessibility of the data. We recommend that you do not store the contents of your respondent data file on a thumb drive or on your office computer’s hard disk as they could be stolen or in the case of thumb drives, could be misplaced. One secure place that you can store your respondent data file is on your network drive that is provided by the college (which is protected and backed up regularly).

3) Your reporting of the data must be done in such as way as to protect the identities of the survey participants. In addition, you will have to be careful of analyzing groups of respondents where the total number may be very small (5 respondents or less). It is difficult to draw inferences or conclusions from such low respondent totals, and in some cases, low numbers could possibly identify individuals (such as respondents from a Department with a very low number of students and/or faculty), so great care must be exercised in analyzing and reporting data with small counts.

What are some tips for developing a good survey instrument?

1) Keep the survey as brief as possible to ensure the respondent does not get frustrated with wordy questions, skips the question or leaves the survey completely.

2) Design your survey instrument to be as aesthetically appealing and easy to read (it is a good practice to have someone else review your survey instrument before sending it out).
3) Use plenty of blank space between items.
4) Make it easy for respondents to record their answers.
5) Have a logical and easily followed order and organization of questions.
6) Questions relating to a specific area should generally be grouped together.
7) Generally, questions of most interest to respondents should be placed first.
8) Survey questions that are difficult to answer should be placed at the end of the survey (unless these questions are crucial for setting the tone or introducing the substance of the survey).
9) Always pilot-test your survey with several people from your intended survey group who did not help with developing the instrument! Their feedback will be very helpful!

What types of questions can I have on my survey?
Questions on a survey can be group into two different classifications:
1) **Closed-ended questions** (where the respondent selects answers provided by the researcher).
   These types of questions:
   a. Are more uniformly interpreted by survey respondents
   b. Produce information that is easily analyzed
   c. Are not hindered by the respondent’s verbosity
   d. Eliminate problems associated with vocabulary and definition
   e. Permit more questions
2) **Open-ended questions** (where the respondent supplies their own answer in a free-form style)
   These types of questions:
   a. Are relatively free from the researcher’s influence (and possible bias)
   b. Elicit a wide variety of responses
   c. Are useful for introducing new parts of the survey
   d. Give respondents a chance to express their opinions
   e. Give detail credibility to the analysis

I need some help in wording my closed-ended survey question, can you help?
In general, questions should be as short as possible (to help the respondent in reliably answering the question and to reduce irritation from the respondent if they are forced to read too-lengthy questions). In addition,
1) Language should be simple, clear and written in such a way where the respondent is addressed respectfully and courteously
2) Simple sentences should be used if at all possible
3) Biased words or phrases should be avoided (example: “Don’t you think that people who drive SUVs have a complete disregard for the environment?”)
4) The survey question should only address one item (“double-barreled” questions should be split into two questions. Examples of “double-barreled” question are “People with computers or cell phones demonstrate technical competence” or “People with dogs and cats are more likely to eat pimento cheese.”) Questions that ask for a response to two things need to be separated into two questions. In the first example you would want one question for computers and one question for cell phones. In the second case, you would want one question for those who own dogs and another for those who own cats.
Questions should focus on behaviors not perceptions or value judgments. (For example, you want to avoid wording a question like this: “People who are older should never drive”. A more appropriate wording of the question would be “People who are older have more traffic accidents.”

I want to use a rating (Likert) scale on some of my survey questions; do you have any guidance for Likert Scales?

Here are some helpful tips for constructing a Likert scale:

1) A Likert Scale can be as few as two items or as many as seven or more possible responses. Most Likert Scales have 5 possible responses. Depending on the nature of your question, here are some possible Likert scales that you can use:
   a. Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
   b. Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neutral, Satisfied, Very Satisfied
   c. Never, Occasionally, Fairly Often, Many Times, Very Often, Always
   d. Much Lower, Slightly Lower, About the Same, Higher, Much Higher
   e. Yes, No
   f. Agree, Disagree

2) When using a Likert Scale, you may want to use an option, such as “Not Applicable” or “Don’t know” for those respondents who might not have experience or exposure in the item being evaluated.

3) You may want to consider using a 4-point Likert Scale, eliminating the “neutral” response, forcing the respondent to pick an option.

4) In general, survey respondents avoid selecting answers on the extreme ends of the survey scales which creates a phenomenon called “Central Tendency Bias.” Good question design will mitigate this bias.

What should I think about if I want to use open-ended questions?

1) Open-ended responses can also be time consuming to analyze, so you want to limit the use of open ended questions to the most critical areas.

2) You need to be cognizant of union contracts as well as questions that might be related to the evaluation of individuals - your Research Office can assist you in the construction of open-ended questions.

3) Open ended comments provide a wealth of rich information but the results must be distributed with care. For example, you might want to share the analyses of the report with the entire college community but survey open ended comments might be shared with just Department Deans or the Vice Presidents of the applicable area.