Ithaca College Survey Research Center
Best Practices for Survey Research

This document provides recommendations on how to plan and administer a survey.

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Planning a Survey

Effective survey research involves a good deal of thought and planning. Below are some questions and guidelines that will help you navigate the basics of survey administration.

Note that some information in this section was drawn from *Questionnaire Survey Research: What Works*, by Linda A. Suskie (Association for Institutional Research Resources for Institutional Research, Number Six).

What are the objectives of this survey?
It’s helpful to create a detailed, written statement about the specific information that you hope to gather. This will provide clarity while the survey is being planned and created.

How and by whom will the results of this survey be used?
Effective surveys usually either 1) gather information that helps people make decisions or, 2) provide informative and useful general background information about a specific topic. What decisions will be made using the results of this survey? Will the questions included in the survey yield the information needed, either for decision-making or for useful general background information? Avoid asking for information that would be “nice to know”, but not very useful.

Is a survey really the best way to obtain the information you need?
Sometimes other methods of gathering information – focus groups, interviews, use of pre-existing sources of the same type of information – are more appropriate than doing a survey. Bear in mind, too, that the over-use of surveys at the College may lead to survey fatigue and declining response rates. Check the IC Survey Clearinghouse, available on IR’s website, to evaluate whether you could use the results of surveys that have already been done.

What other work has been done on this topic?
- Has the topic been discussed by groups at IC? The venue(s) and tenor of these discussions may inform the creation of the survey.

- Have other surveys or research work been done on this topic at IC? What were the results and what actions were taken?

- Do some research outside of IC. Have other colleges done similar surveys and if so, can you glean ideas from their survey instruments?
Planning a Survey (continued)

Are the purpose, title, and contents of the survey sufficiently neutral?
In other words, could the way the topic will be presented in the survey bias the results?

Will the survey be anonymous?
Anonymous surveys
- May solicit more candid responses
- May result in the submission of multiple responses by individuals who feel strongly about the topic
- Do not allow basic demographic information to be matched in from other sources, so it will have to be requested on the survey
- Require that survey reminders be sent to the entire survey population, rather than just non-respondents

Non-anonymous surveys
- May cause respondents to be less candid
- Can be set up so that multiple responses by individuals are not possible
- Allow basic demographic information to be matched in from other sources, so it does not have to be requested on the survey
- Make it possible to send survey reminders only to non-respondents

Will completion of the survey and/or certain questions on the survey be mandatory?
When pondering this question, remember that requiring responses may bias the survey results.

Whom will you survey?
Think very carefully about whom should be surveyed. For example, if you want to survey current students: Do you want information from all students, or only undergraduates? If the latter, do you want to survey all undergraduates, or only those who are full-time / degree-seeking / studying on the Ithaca campus / sophomores / living in residence halls, etc.?

Will the survey be administered to a whole population, or to a sample of a population?
For example, do you want to survey all undergraduates, or only half of them? Surveying a sample of a population instead of a whole population was done in the past – when all surveys were done on paper and involved printing, mailing, and handling – primarily to cut costs. With the advent of web surveys and emailed survey communications, these costs are no longer a consideration. Another instance of when surveying a sample of a population might be a good choice is when several surveys of the same population are slated for the same time period; for example, send one survey to half of the faculty, and one survey to the other half.

If you choose to survey a sample of a population, how many people should you sample and how should the sample be selected? IR would be happy to consult with you on this.
Planning a Survey (continued)

Who will compile the survey population data?  From where?  When?
The source and timing of survey population data compilation are critical. IR would be happy to consult with
you on this.

What data about your survey population should you gather?
Beyond basic identifying information about your survey population (student/employee/alumni ID and name),
you may want to gather other information that will help you gauge the representativeness of survey
respondents (note that this can only be done if the survey is not anonymous so that survey responses can be
linked back to survey population data).  For example, what percentage of the survey population is female, and
how does this compare to the percentage of survey respondents who are female?  Were students in the
School of Business adequately represented in the results?  Many other data points can be used to determine if
survey respondents were representative of the survey population as a whole.

In addition, you might want to be able to analyze the survey results based on data gathered at the time the
survey population was compiled (again, this is only possible if the survey is not anonymous).  For example, in a
survey of all undergraduate students, you might want to report the results overall and by school to see if
responses varied by school.

When will the survey be administered?
It’s a good idea to consult the academic calendar to make sure that you’re not planning to administer a survey
close to exams, close to or during a holiday break, or at other times when people will be less likely to respond
to a survey.  In addition, be sure to check the campus-wide calendar of survey research at Ithaca College,
available on IR’s website, which can help you avoid overlapping your survey administration with others’
surveys.

For how long will the survey be administered?
A survey should be open for a long enough time so that people have sufficient time to respond (at least one or
two weeks), but not so long that no responses are coming in, interest has waned, and analysis of the results is
being unnecessarily delayed.
Components of a Survey – an Overview

- **Survey administration timeline**: This document details survey administration tasks, targeted and actual completion dates, and individuals responsible for completing each task. Please refer to IR’s survey administration timeline template for an example of how to set up this timeline.

- **Survey instrument**: please refer to the “Creating a Survey Instrument” section on pages 5-6 for more information

- **Survey instrument pilot testing**: please refer to the “Pilot Testing a Survey Instrument” section on page 7 for more information

- **Survey communications**: please refer to the “Creating Survey Communications” section on page 4 for more information
Creating a Survey Instrument

A good survey instrument is crucial in order to gather the information you need. Its creation usually involves a significant amount of time. Collaboration of several people, who invariably will bring different perspectives and strengths to the process, can be very helpful when creating a survey instrument.

Note that the information in this section assumes that you plan to do a web-based survey. Please feel free to consult with IR if you’re planning to do a paper-based survey.

Steps in the Creation of a Web Survey

- Paper drafts of the survey should be created first in order to illustrate the survey’s content.
- Create the web version of the survey when you have a final or nearly final draft of the survey content in paper form to avoid having to do lots of work with both versions if content changes are needed. Have colleagues take the web survey to review and test it.
- It’s helpful to pilot test either the survey content in paper form or the survey content and formatting in web form. Please refer to page 7 for survey pilot testing recommendations.

Web Survey Software: Qualtrics

Ithaca College has a College-wide license to use Qualtrics, an online software package used to create and administer web surveys (see http://www.qualtrics.com/ for more information about Qualtrics). Qualtrics is much more powerful than most other web survey creation software packages, yet is fairly easy to use.

Members of the College community who want to do web surveys have the following options:

- Use Qualtrics to create and administer their survey completely on their own
- In consultation with IR, use Qualtrics to create and administer their survey
- Collaborate with IR on survey administration, with IR creating and administering the survey

Please contact IR for more information about using Qualtrics.
Creating a Survey Instrument (continued)

Survey Introduction
It is good practice to include an introduction on the first page of a survey. The purpose of the introduction is to inform respondents about various aspects of the survey. Try to keep the wording used in the survey introduction consistent with the wording used in survey communications.

Recommended elements
- Brief description of the topic of the survey, why and by whom it’s being done, who is being surveyed, and how the results will be used
- A statement that participation in the survey is voluntary
- A statement that survey responses are confidential
- If the survey is anonymous, state this

Examples of survey introduction statements
“All survey responses are voluntary and confidential for internal College use only.”
“Your responses are voluntary, confidential, and anonymous.”

If IR is administering the survey for you, include a statement like the following
“The Ithaca College Office of Institutional Research is responsible for the administration and analysis of this survey. For technical questions about the survey, please email iroffice@ithaca.edu or call 607-274-3164.”
Pilot Testing a Survey Instrument

It is helpful to pilot test the contents of a survey with a small group of people with the same background as the intended survey population (e.g., students, employees, etc.) to make sure that the survey questions and response options make sense.

Some recommendations
- Keep the pilot test group(s) small (around 10 people), to encourage conversation and a relaxed atmosphere.
- Offer refreshments.
- Either a paper or web version of the survey can be used. A paper version is easier to administer and may provide feedback in the form of notes on the survey, while use of a web version can help insure that survey formatting, particularly branching patterns, work properly and make sense to respondents.

General format of a survey pilot test
- Introduction
  - Describe the topic of the survey, why and by whom it’s being done, who is being surveyed, and how the results will be used
  - Explain why the pilot test is being done: to make sure that the survey makes sense to respondents and to get feedback on how the survey can be improved
  - State that survey results gathered during the pilot test will not be used

- Allow time for pilot testers to complete the survey, noting that they can ask questions, raise concerns, or suggest changes at any time.

- After pilot testers have completed the survey, begin a conversation by asking questions that invite conversation, for example: Did the survey questions make sense? Was there anything confusing about the survey? Do you have suggestions on how we can make the survey better?
Creating Survey Communications

Administration of a survey involves the sending of several communications to the survey population: the survey pre-announcement, the invitation to complete the survey, and survey reminders.

The following recommendations assume that survey communications are being sent via email. Many of the same recommendations apply when paper survey communications are being sent.

General recommendations

- Use consistent wording throughout the survey communications. Make sure this wording is also consistent with the wording used in the survey instrument.

- Keep survey communications brief and to the point. Use clear, concise language.

- It’s helpful to have survey communications signed by someone with whom the survey population shares a connection and whose involvement in the survey may encourage people to respond. For example, students in a certain department may have a closer connection to and thus may be more willing to respond to a survey signed by the department chair, rather than the Dean of the school.

Pre-announcement

A survey pre-announcement can be sent before respondents are invited to respond to the survey. Use of a pre-announcement is optional, but recommended, as it serves to introduce the survey population to the topic that will be presented in the survey and create a sense of anticipation.

- Send the pre-announcement fairly close to the time the survey will be administered so that the topic will be fresh in people’s minds when the survey opens. Typically, the pre-announcement is sent about a week before the survey invitations are sent.

- Use a brief but descriptive email subject line; for example, “Survey coming concerning...”.

- Describe the topic of the survey, why and by whom it’s being done, who is being surveyed, and how the results will be used.

- Include an approximation of when the recipient will be invited to respond to the survey; for example, “within the next several days” or “next week”.

- Conclude with a statement like, “We hope you will take a few moments to provide your valuable input.”
Creating Survey Communications *(continued)*

**Invitation to complete the survey**
The invitation to complete the survey will be similar to the survey pre-announcement, but should be a little more detailed and include a link to the survey.

- Use a brief but descriptive email subject line; for example, “Invitation to respond to the [title of the survey]”.

- Describe the topic of the survey, why and by whom it’s being done, who is being surveyed, and how the results will be used.

- Include a statement that response to the survey is voluntary and that survey responses will be kept confidential.

- If the survey is anonymous, state this.

- An estimate of how long it will take to complete the survey may be included, but is not required; for example, “Typically, this survey takes about 10 minutes to complete.”

- If IR is administering the survey for you, include a statement like the following: “The Ithaca College Office of Institutional Research is responsible for the administration and analysis of this survey. For additional information, email iroffice@ithaca.edu or call 607-274-3164.”

- If IR is not administering the survey for you, include contact information for someone who can answer questions about the survey and respond to any technical problems respondents encounter.

- Include thanks for completion of the survey; for example, “Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input is crucial in helping us to make an informed decision.”

- Include a statement like, “Please click the link below to access the survey or cut and paste the link into your Internet browser.”
Creating Survey Communications (continued)

Reminders to complete the survey

Generally, sending several emails that remind people to complete the survey will result in a higher response rate. If the survey is not anonymous, the reminders should be sent only to those who have not yet responded to the survey. If the survey is anonymous, the reminders will have to be sent to the entire survey population.

- Use a brief but descriptive email subject line; for example, “Reminder to respond to the [title of the survey]”.

- Keep the body of the reminder emails very brief. It is not necessary to include all of the information that was presented in the pre-announcement and the invitation. For example, “Don’t forget to complete the [title of the survey]. Your feedback is important in helping [group doing the survey] decide to [issue at hand].”

- In the final survey reminder, which ideally should be sent a day before the survey is scheduled to close, should note when the survey will close to encourage timely response; for example, “The survey closes at 5 p.m. on [date]. Your responses are important [reasons why responses are important].”

- Include a statement like, “Please click the link below to access the survey or cut and paste the link into your Internet browser.”