

IOWA

Division of Student Life

Guidelines for Developing and Conducting Surveys

Surveys are a powerful assessment tool used to estimate population characteristics, including attitudes, behaviors, opinions, and values. They utilize various formats and question types depending on the outlined purpose and goals.

INTRODUCTION

This document provides the essential guidelines for designing and conducting effective surveys. It outlines key steps such as defining the survey's purpose, formulating questions, selecting the appropriate distribution method, and analyzing responses. By following these basic yet effective practices, you can ensure that your survey collects meaningful and actionable data.

If you have any questions or require further guidance, please contact Teri Schnelle at teri-schnelle@uiowa.edu.

ARTICULATE THE PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY

It is essential to clearly define the purpose of your survey to ensure that the data collected is relevant and in alignment with your goals. Without a well-defined purpose, surveys may include unnecessary questions, leading to lower responses rates and unactionable results.

- Clearly define the problem statement, outlining the survey's purpose and specific goals.
- Identify the target population you will be surveying and why this population is related to the problem statement and goals.
- Collaborate with stakeholders to ensure the survey's purpose addresses relevant topics.
- Align the survey's purpose with organizational or institutional goals to support data-driven decisions.

Example problem statement:

The Division of Student Life offers late-night programs, such as "Rec After Dark", to provide students with safe and engaging activities. However, participation rates have been lower than predicted, prompting us to identify factors influencing attendance and gather student feedback to enhance these programs.

CREATE A SURVEY INTRODUCTION

A strong introduction helps establish a rapport with respondents and encourages participation. It sets expectations by explaining the survey's purpose, the estimated time commitment, and confidentiality parameters.

- Necessary components:
 - Name of the organization conducting the survey.
 - Purpose of the survey
 - Value of participating and how results will be used.
 - Estimated time to complete the survey.
 - Assurance of confidentiality or anonymity.

- Confidentiality is achieved when respondents' identities are linked to their responses, but the information is only accessible to authorized personnel. Personal information is kept private, but it may be used to analyze survey results.
- Anonymity is achieved when no identifying information is collected so responses cannot be tracked back to the respondent. This ensures complete privacy and can often lead to more honest responses when disclosed.
 - Statement that participation is voluntary.
- Best practices:
 - Use clear, professional, and respectful language.
 - Tailor the introduction to the audience.
 - Emphasize how participation benefits respondents.

Example introduction:

The Division of Student Life is conducting this survey to understand student preferences and obstacles related to late-night activities. Your feedback will help us improve these events to better suit student needs.

The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Responses are completely anonymous. Participation is voluntary, and you may exit the survey at any time.

Thank you for your time and input! For any further questions, please contact [survey contact's name and email].

DETERMINE THE QUESTION SEQUENCE

The order of your survey questions affects response rates and quality. A logical sequence keeps respondents engaged and prevents confusion and survey fatigue.

- Start with easier, engaging questions to capture respondents' interest.
 - Increases the likelihood of survey completion.
- Group related questions together to maintain a logical flow.
 - Avoid frequent shifts in subject matter to reduce confusion.
- Follow a logical order:
 - General questions before specific ones.
 - Non-sensitive questions before sensitive ones.
- Consider using filtering questions to direct respondents to relevant sections based on their experiences.
 - Minimizes unnecessary time spent on questions irrelevant to the respondent.

Example question sequence:

1. Are you aware that the University of Iowa offers late-night programs for students?
 - a. Yes/No, if "no", skip to question 5

2. Have you attended any late-night programs in the past semester?
 - a. Yes/No, if “no”, skip to question 4
3. In your experience, how satisfied were you with the programs you attended?
 - a. Very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neutral, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied
4. If you were aware of, but decided not to attend any late-night programs, what factors discouraged you from attending?
 - a. Time/date of event
 - b. Type of activity offered
 - c. Transportation issues
 - d. Other [please specify]
5. What type of activities would make you more likely to attend light-night programs?
 - a. [open-ended]

DEVELOP THE SURVEY

A well-structured survey produces reliable data. Choosing the right survey format and accompanying questions ensures clarity, minimizes biases, and makes collected data easier to analyze for the intended survey goals.

- Choose the correct survey type to ensure the data collected is relevant, actionable, and in alignment with the survey’s goals.
- Clearly defining the type of survey helps to develop focused questions.
- Three types of surveys with distinct purposes:
 - Needs assessment survey: solicit public opinion about community issues and possible solutions.
 - Marketing survey: evaluate the nature and level of demand for a product or service.
 - Evaluation survey: learn the impact of a public or private program, policy, etc.
- Three types of survey questions:
 - Open-ended questions: gather detailed insights on a topic.
 - Harder to analyze and compare responses.
 - Close-ended questions: provide structured response options.
 - Easier to analyze and compare responses.
 - Partially close-ended questions: combine predefined categories with an “other” option to collect additional responses.
- Best practices:
 - Avoid jargon, ambiguous language, and leading questions.
 - Use neutral wording to prevent biases in responses.
 - Pretest questions to ensure they elicit desired information and are easily understood.
 - Online surveys should take less than 15 minutes to complete. Keep the survey concise to by focusing on essential information that aligns with the survey’s goals. Keep in mind to gather what you need to know, not what would be nice to know in order to address your problem statement.

Example of types of surveys:

Needs assessment survey: What are the most significant barriers preventing students from attending late-night programs? Please rank the following options from least to most significant: [insert list of options].

Marketing survey: How likely are you to attend a late-night program if events were scheduled at more convenient times? (Very likely, somewhat likely, neutral, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely)

Evaluation survey: Since attending late-night programs, how has your sense of connection to campus life changed? (Improved significantly, improved somewhat, no change, declined somewhat, declined significantly)

Example questions:

Open-ended: What changes or improvements would you recommend to enhance late-night programs at the university?

Close-ended: Overall, how satisfied are you with the late-night programs offered on campus?

[Very satisfied, satisfied, neutral, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied]

Partially close-ended: What type of late-night programs have you attended? [insert list of late-night programs, with an option for other]

SELECT A SURVEY FORMAT

Selecting the right survey format is essential to maximize response rates and ensure quality data collection. Different formats offer various advantages and challenges depending on the survey's goals, audience, and resources.

- Mail surveys
 - Pros: reaches a broad audience, allows respondents to complete at their convenience, reduces interviewer bias.
 - Cons: lower response rates, longer turnaround time, higher costs for printing and mailing.
- Telephone surveys
 - Pros: allows clarification of questions, quick response collection, higher response rates than mail.
 - Cons: may be costly, respondents may feel pressured, declining phone survey participation due to spam calls.
- Web-based surveys
 - Pros: cost-efficient, quick response collection, integration of images, videos, and interactive elements to enhance engagement.
 - Cons: excludes respondents without internet access, potential for lower response rates if not promoted effectively.

- In-person surveys
 - Pros: highest response rate, allows clarification of questions, allows observational data collection.
 - Cons: time-consuming, requires personnel, potential interviewer bias.

Example:

The Division of Student Life may choose a web-based survey for cost efficiency and practicality. The University of Iowa offers free internet access for students and web-based approach may be the most appealing to the target population.

If the goal was to gather qualitative data on a specific event, The Division of Student Life may conduct in-person surveys following an event to seek targeted feedback.

ENSURE PROOFREADING OF SURVEY

Errors in wording, structure, or survey flow can impede the validity of your survey results. Reviewing the survey with stakeholder and a subset of the targeted respondents can help refine the survey's clarity and effectiveness.

- Share draft survey with colleagues, stakeholders, and representatives from the target population.
 - Helps identify ambiguities and biases.
 - Ensures questions are consistent with survey goals.
 - Ensures language is appropriate for target audience.
- Use feedback to refine wording, flow, and overall design.

Example:

Before the final distribution of the survey, The Division of Student Life may share a draft with:

- Stakeholders (ex: program coordinators, sources of funding)
- Colleagues (ex: student affairs staff)
- Representatives from the target population (students who attend the late-night events, and those who do not)

Each group provides feedback on the survey clarity, length, and relevance to the problem statement. Based on their responses, the survey can be refined and revised before final distribution.

DETERMINE IF YOU NEED IRB APPROVAL

Understanding whether your survey needs IRB approval prevents ethical issues. In general, surveys intended for research or knowledge generation need IRB knowledge, while quality improvement surveys typically do not.

- Determine if the survey qualifies as quality improvement or research.

- Surveys that test hypotheses or generate generalizable knowledge **typically require** Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.
- Surveys intended to be used for quality assurance or improvement of a program or service **typically do not require** IRB approval. Most surveys conducted within The Division of Student Life fall into this category.
- The Human Subjects Research Determination (HSRD) form collects necessary to decide whether the project needs IRB approval.

Example:

If the survey on late-night programs intended only to enhance the University of Iowa's activity offerings to students, IRB approval is likely unnecessary. If one of the survey's goals was to publish the results in an academic journal, IRB approval would be necessary.

*For additional questions on IRB and HSRD guidelines, please contact Teri Schnelle (teri-schnelle@uiowa.edu), and visit: <https://hso.research.uiowa.edu/get-started/do-i-need-irb-approval>

PILOT THE SURVEY

Testing your survey before the final launch can help identify unclear questions, technical issues, and any other potential barriers to survey completion. A pilot launch ensures the final survey runs smoothly and produces meaningful data.

- Test the survey with a representative sample from the target audience.
 - Identifies ambiguous questions, logical gaps, and technical issues.
- Use feedback to refine the structure and content.
- Administer the pilot survey under similar conditions to the actual survey to identify potential logistical challenges.

Example:

Distribute the survey to a group of 10-20 students, including attendees and non-attendees of the late-night programs. After they complete it, ask them about the experience of taking the survey and any suggestions.

DECIDE ON A CENSUS OR SAMPLE

Selecting the appropriate population ensures your survey results are representative of the population you are aiming to impact. A census includes the entire population, while a sample provides a more manageable subset.

- Census: survey the entire population when feasible, such as in small or specific groups.
- Sample: select a random, representative group from the population when it is too large, or resources are limited.
 - Sampling strategies:

- Random sampling: minimizes bias by giving all participants an equal chance of selection.
- Stratified sampling: ensures representation across key subgroups (age, gender, location, etc.)
- Consider budget, time, personnel, and other resources.
- Obtain a list of the target population from available databases.

Example of a census vs. survey:

Census: The University of Iowa has 30,000 students, but only 500 regularly attend late-night programs. Surveying all 500 students is realistic.

Sample: For non-regular attendees, surveying the remaining 29,500 students is not realistic. Selecting a random sample of 1,000 students can still provide accurate insights into late-night program participation.

*For additional questions about determining the appropriate sample size, please contact Teri Schnelle (teri-schnelle@uiowa.edu).

PLAN REMINDERS

Reminders increase response rates and ensure diverse participation, further producing representative results. Thoughtful timing and personalized follow-up are effective means to maximize survey completion.

- Suggested email sequence: one initial invitation, one reminder one week later, and a final reminder prior to survey closure.
 - Consider sending additional follow-ups, especially when response rates begin to decline.
- For online surveys, use recognizable and trustworthy email addresses to increase response rates.
- Personalize reminders to emphasize the importance of each recipient's participation.
- Send reminders at different times of the day or week to reach a broader audience.

Example of an e-mail reminder:

Subject line: Reminder to Share Your Feedback on Late-Night Programs!

Dear [insert personalized student name],

We noticed you haven't had a chance to complete our survey about The University of Iowa's light-night programs. Your feedback is extremely valuable in helping us improve the events available to students like you!

The survey takes just 10 minutes, and your responses are completely anonymous. Please take a moment to share your thoughts before the survey closes on [deadline].

[insert link to survey]

Thank you for your time and input. If you have any questions, feel free to contact [insert contact name and email].

Best regards,
[your name]
[your role & organization]
University of Iowa

CONSIDER UTILIZING INCENTIVES

Incentives are effective in boosting survey response rates, but they must be used cautiously to avoid coercion and ensure feasibility. Understanding different incentive structures helps balance participation benefits and logistical considerations.

- Offer relevant incentives to match the effort required to take the survey.
 - Common incentives include gift cards or discounts.
- Prepaid incentives: sent to potential respondents before survey completion, such as a \$5 gift card included with the survey invitation.
 - Tend to yield higher response rates, as participants feel a sense of obligation to reciprocate.
 - Can be administratively and financially burdensome.
- Promised incentives: every respondent receives something after completing the survey, such as a dining hall meal voucher.
 - Tend to yield the second highest response rates.
 - More cost-effective for longer or complex surveys, but can be costly based on sample size.
- Prize drawing incentives: respondents are entered into a raffle for a larger prize, such as a \$100 gift card.
 - Tend to yield the lowest response rates.
 - More feasible for surveys with smaller budgets.
- Best practices:
 - Consider ethical implications, ensuring incentives do not coerce participation.
 - (e.g. offering free tuition)
 - Consider financial aid implications when offering cash incentives to students.
 - Clearly communicate incentive details, including instructions on how to claim them and any associated conditions.

Example of incentives:

Prepaid incentive: A \$5 Hawk Shop gift card included with the initial survey invitation email, encouraging students to complete the survey.

"Enjoy a gift card on us! We'd love to hear your thoughts on campus late-night events, so please complete this short survey."

Promised incentive: Every student who completes the survey will receive a free dining hall meal voucher.

"Thank you for sharing your feedback! As a token of appreciation, you'll receive a free meal voucher upon completing the survey."

Prize drawing incentive: respondents will be entered into a raffle for a \$100 Hawk Shop gift card.

"Complete the survey for a chance to win a \$100 gift card! Your feedback will help shape future late-night events on campus."

LAUNCHING & MONITORING THE SURVEY

Launching and monitoring the survey is critical to ensure an adequate response rate and ensure the survey results accurately reflect the target population. Proper planning, execution and follow-ups help maximize participation and reduce the risk of bias due to low response rates. In general, the larger the number of respondents, the more accurate the data is considered.

- Tips for a successful survey:
 - Survey length
 - Shorter surveys (under 15 minutes) yield higher completion rates.
 - Survey format
 - In-person and telephone surveys yield higher response rates than mail and web-based surveys.
 - Survey timing
 - Sending surveys at considerate times yield higher response rates.
 - Ex: do not send students a survey during finals week.
 - Reminders and follow-ups
 - Sending multiple reminders boosts response rates.
 - Utilize different media platforms to promote the survey.
 - Incentives
 - Offering prepaid, promised, or prize drawing incentives encourages responses.
- Track response rates within the first few days to identify engagement issues early on and address them using the above tips.
- What is a good response rate?
 - Mail surveys: 20-40%
 - Telephone surveys: 50-80%
 - Web-based surveys: 10-30%
 - In-person surveys: 70-90%

Example:

If the web-based survey on late-night programs has a low initial response rate (below 10%), additional email reminders or the addition of incentives (ex: adding a raffle) could help boost responses. If the goal was to target a specific group, such as students who regularly attend the events, conducting in-person surveys at the event locations may be more effective in gathering data.

REPORTING SURVEY RESULTS

Effectively reporting survey results ensures that findings are clearly identifiable, actionable, and accurately reflect the data collected. A well-structured report helps stakeholders understand key insights and make informed decisions to meet the goals outlined at the begin of the survey process.

- Key elements of a simple survey report:
 - An executive summary provides a brief overview of the survey's purpose, key findings, and major takeaways.
 - Methodology describes how the survey was conducted, including the sample size, survey format, and data collection method.
 - Key findings include a summary of significant trends patterns, and notable statistics using the collected data.
 - Data visualization utilizes charts, graphs, and tables to present data in a clear and easy to interpret manner.
 - Interpretations explains the significance of the results and application to the survey's purpose. Provide information on what decisions or changes were made as a result of the survey findings.
 - Limitations acknowledges ant potential biases, issues, or obstacles that may have affected data collection or interpretation.

Source:

Dillman, D.A. & Salant, P. (1994). *How to Conduct Your Own Survey*. John Wiley & Sons.