Using Surveys for Assessment

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Key Questions

• What do you want to know about?
  – Attitudes/Perceptions/Levels of Satisfaction
  – Skills/Behaviors/Knowledge Gains

• How do you plan to use/analyze the data?
  – Measure individual gains (e.g., improved skills)
  – Track changes over time using institutional performance indicators (e.g., demand for services)
  – Generalize about constructs or latent variables (e.g., sense of belonging versus desire to belong)

• Can you use individual items or do you need to create scales (composite measures)?
Attitudes versus Skills

• Attitudes/Perceptions/Levels of Satisfaction
  – Easier to measure, often less wordy, and faster
  – Requires thinking about underlying construct
  – Best measured with scales, not individual items

• Skills/Behaviors/Knowledge Gain
  – Difficult to measure
  – Requires detailed prompts to stimulate reflection
  – Takes respondent longer to complete
  – Prone to cognitive processing errors
Sources of Respondent Error

• Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinkis’s (2000) “Psychology of Survey Response”
  – Comprehension of question
  – Retrieval of information
  – Judgment or estimation
  – Reporting of answer
Comprehension of Question

• Do all respondents interpret words/phrases the same way?
  – Are teaching assistants “instructors”?  
  – What does “critical thinking” mean?  
  – How often is “occasionally”? “very often”?  
  – What is “sufficient support”?
Retrieval of Information

• Memories are stored in layers
  • Faculty interactions may be organized by course, or by course within semester, so recalling faculty interactions is not sequential and requires cognitive processing.

• Dates are rarely recalled accurately
  – Asking about “this semester” better than “past 3 months”

• Recall fades as time passes

• Unique events are more accurately recalled than common events

• Do smarter students appear more engaged simply because they have better recall of faculty interactions?
Judgment or Estimation

• Cannot recall number of events in past year
• Hence, use heuristics to derive estimates
• Cues can include question wording
  – Alternate positive and negative phrasing
• Halo Effect
  – High GPA students pick answers studious students would pick
Reporting of Answer

• Social desirability bias may cause students to ignore their estimates and report what boosts their self-image and not report negative information.

• To get accurate information about negative behaviors, ask about even worse behaviors in your survey, so by comparison the things you want to know about don’t look so bad.