

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 Rasinski'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.