

St. Mary's College  
Institutional Survey Guidelines  
Summer 2023

### Survey Guidelines

Surveys are an important tool for gaining insight into many aspects of institutional functioning at St. Mary's College. The guidelines below are designed to help individuals and offices develop and deploy surveys in a manner that is legal, respectful, and responsible.

A companion document, "Survey Development Guide," available on the St. Mary's website, provides some basic information about creating and deploying a survey for people who may be new to the process.

### Types of surveys

While all surveys have the same basic format and purpose (namely asking people questions to obtain various types of information), surveys can differ significantly along various dimensions.

- Who is administering the survey? Is it an individual or an office?
- What population is being surveyed, e.g. students, staff, alumni?
- How large is the survey population, e.g. are all students being surveyed or just a subset?
- What type of information is being collected in the survey?
- What is the purpose of gathering this type of information? How will the survey results be used?
- What types of questions are used in the survey, e.g. simple rating scales, multiple choice questions, open-ended questions?
- How long is the survey, either in terms of number of questions or the time required to complete the survey?
- At what time point in the academic cycle is the survey administered?

### Purpose of defining survey guidelines

There are several reasons for developing and publishing these survey guidelines, including but not limited to the following.

- To determine what type(s) of approval may be necessary for a particular survey, and what individual or office can provide that approval.
- To determine if a survey needs to go through the approval of the Institutional Review Board.
- To ensure that multiple surveys are not being administered to the same population at the same time.
- To ensure that multiple surveys are not collecting the same type of information from the same population.
- To ensure that survey results are used in a way that is legal, ethical, and beneficial.
- To identify resources to help campus stakeholders develop quality surveys.

### Survey approval process

At St. Mary's College there is no single point of contact for granting permission to conduct an institutional survey. Normally the person or office interested in conducting a survey should consult with their supervisor or other appropriate institutional authority.

Certain types of surveys may require an additional level of approval through the [St. Mary's College Institutional Review Board \(IRB\)](#). This committee is designed to evaluate all research activities at St. Mary's College involving human subjects to ensure that the safety and privacy of all participants are respected.

Any survey that includes questions of a personal or sensitive nature (e.g. sexual behavior, drinking or drug use, psychological problems or symptoms) should go through the IRB approval process. Similarly, any survey in which student privacy is potentially compromised without the student's express consent should go through the IRB approval process. Anonymous surveys on neutral topics (e.g. parking or food services) do not normally require IRB approval. However, when in doubt the best course of action is to consult with the IRB, which has a [webpage](#) on the St. Mary's site.

Many nationally normed surveys have prior approval from an Institutional Review Board analogous to the St. Mary's IRB and therefore do not require additional IRB approval unless they are being administered or used in a way that is not consistent with the stated intent of the survey publisher.

### Survey schedule

A master schedule of known institutional surveys is maintained on the [Institutional Research webpage](#). This schedule shows what surveys are being administered, the schedule for administration, and the population being surveyed. Persons or offices who are planning to deploy a survey should consult with this schedule to help plan their survey administration so as to avoid conflict with other surveys. Typically, the response rates for surveys declines when a particular population is asked to complete multiple surveys at the same time.

The survey schedule also provides a brief description of the type of information that is collected through known surveys. Before developing a new survey, it may be helpful to determine if existing surveys already collect the type of information of interest.

### Survey creation tools

Surveys that are purchased from an external vendor typically run off of a platform designed by that vendor, and do not require any special survey software.

Surveys that are "home-grown," i.e. developed in-house by a campus stakeholder, will require some type of survey software. St. Mary's College owns a limited number of licenses for Survey Monkey, which can be used with the appropriate permission. The simplest way to create basic surveys may be through Google forms. There are many online resources available to guide users through the process of creating surveys through Google forms.

## Survey deployment and administration

Once a survey produce has been purchased from an external vendor, or the survey has been created in-house, the next step is to deploy the survey to the target population. For surveys with a small respondent population, you may be able to simply send a link to the survey to individual recipients through email.

For surveys with a larger respondent population (this would include most institutional surveys), it is advisable to check with the Information Technology (ITS) Office to arrange for appropriate deployment of the survey. The ITS office should be consulted in advance so that the appropriate systems are in place when you are actually ready to administer the survey.

## Privacy issues

Protecting the privacy of survey respondents is of paramount importance, for ethical, legal, and practical purposes. In any survey, respondents should be advised about privacy and confidentiality issues prior to taking the survey. A few of these key issues are noted below.

### *Is the survey confidential, anonymous, or both?*

- An anonymous survey is one in which it is not possible to connect survey responses to an individual respondent.
- A confidential survey is one in which it possible to connect responses and respondents, but in which the survey author can safely and reasonably assure that respondent identity will not be revealed for any reason to outside stakeholders (meaning anyone beyond the immediate researcher or research team).
- Some surveys may be non-confidential, meaning that respondent identification is possible. In this situation respondents need to be clearly informed in advance that such is the case, and should be advised about how the survey results are going to be used. Respondents should also provide consent to use their survey responses in accordance with the stated purpose of the survey.

### *Disaggregation of data*

Survey data is often disaggregated by various respondent characteristics to provide a closer look at the data. For example, responses may be broken down by gender, or ethnicity, or religious affiliation, or by several characteristics at once.

A potential danger of disaggregation is producing very small “cell” sizes. For example, if results of a relatively small survey are broken down by both gender and ethnicity, it is possible that there might be only one or two individuals in a given cell (e.g. female Native American or male Hawaiian). In this case, publishing the results could effectively betray the responses of those individuals (for example, maybe an instructor knows that there is only one female Native student in her class).

Common practice in presenting disaggregated survey results is to mask results when the cell size is less than five respondents. For more sensitive types of data, a higher threshold (e.g. 10 respondents) may be appropriate.

### *Open-ended questions*

Many surveys provide respondents with the opportunity to provide open-ended, qualitative responses. While these responses can be very useful and informative, care must be exercised in publishing or disseminating these types of qualitative responses.

One danger is that the nature of the open-ended response may betray the identity of the respondent, e.g. "As the only trans Hispanic student in Mr. Smith's class, I felt..."

A second danger is that open-ended responses may include negative remarks about specific individuals or groups of individuals. Disseminating or publishing such remarks may be unprofessional, unethical, and in some cases illegal.

Even with very positive open-ended comments, it is necessary to obtain the respondent's approval before publishing that comment, e.g. in some promotional materials. In the case of an anonymous survey, you must include a question in the survey asking respondents for consent to publish their comments.

In extremely rare cases, open-ended questions may contain threats to particular individuals or references to dangerous criminal activity. In such cases the comments should be referred to campus safety and/or legal counsel.

### *Incentives*

It is common practice to offer some type of incentive to survey respondents in order to improve the response rate. However, several precautions should be noted in the use of incentives.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to offer incentives: first, every respondent receives the same incentive (e.g. a gift card to Starbucks), or only a small number of randomly selected students receive a larger incentive (e.g. an I-Pad).

In order to offer incentives, it is obviously necessary to know who took the survey, even if we can't identify individual responses. In some situations this may compromise privacy or be considered coercive (e.g. maybe I'm just offering an incentive to find out who didn't take the survey so that I can punish them in some way).

Incentives can produce a bias in survey responses. In some cases, respondents may consciously or unconsciously believe that their chances of "winning" an incentive will be greater if they respond positively. In other cases, respondents may complete the survey as quickly as possible simply to gain access to an incentive.

If the sampling method for selecting survey respondents systematically excludes certain demographic subgroups, then the offer of incentives can be seen as discriminatory.

Large incentives can be problematic from multiple perspectives.

- From a legal standpoint, randomly selecting one respondent to win a new TV can be considered a form of gambling (in effect, participation in the survey is akin to purchasing a lottery ticket).
- Large financial gifts (e.g. a \$100 gift card) may have tax consequences both for the respondent and for the institution and have to be reported appropriately.

- Large financial gifts can compromise a student's financial aid package, or in the case of student-athletes may violate NCAA rules.

### Resources

There are many online resources to help assist in the creation and analysis of a quality survey.

At St. Mary's College, the Office of Institutional Research can provide some assistance and guidance in survey production and analysis.

Additionally, the Institutional Research Office has published a short document entitled "Survey Development Guide," which provides some basic information about creating and deploying a survey.