

Survey Design

Things to Consider Before Conducting a Survey

Collaborative Programs Research & Evaluation

Intended Use/Impact

When thinking about the intended purpose of data collected from a survey, it is important to consider the following: how you intend to use the data you collect, who the intended audience is, how you will ensure that the phenomenon under investigation is accurately represented, and how the data will be used after you have collected and analyzed them.

- What is the purpose of collecting these data? Specifically, do you intend to inform/educate your audience (e.g. to show that students with particular characteristics have higher rates of matriculation), to persuade others (e.g. to illustrate that students who receive a particular educational intervention are more likely matriculate than similar students), or to provoke a call to action (e.g. increase funding for your program)?
- Who is the audience? Who will be your toughest critics regarding the quality of your data?
- What specific information are you trying to convey? What is the hole in existing information that you are aiming to fill with the data you are collecting? What specifically are you trying to persuade your audience to believe/do?
- What type, source, quantity, quality, data collection methods, evaluation design will illustrate to your audience that your data are sound and represent an accurate picture of what you are investigating? Will your results be challenged if you have several open ended questions where answers may vary widely and quantitative analysis may be made more difficult?
- How will the data be used? Are these primarily for funders who have specific requirements for reporting program results? Are they for policymakers, or other CBOs?

Data Collection Considerations

- Who is the best source for the data; from whom should you be collecting data? Who should you include in your sample? Is the sample demographically representative of the larger population? Are students the best source for the data, or should you ask staff or teachers these questions?
- When should you collect the data? Does it make sense to collect the data at the beginning of the academic year, prior to the intervention? Does the time of day matter? When will the results have the biggest impact? Do you need to collect data more than once; do you need a pre- and post-test to determine a baseline and movement from that baseline? Do you need to collect data at several points in time? Should a teacher administer the survey during the school day with all participants sitting in one room?

- What types of analyses do you plan to do? Will you be conducting separate analyses by demographic group? If you are, you need to make sure to include the items by which you plan on disaggregating data in the data collection instrument.
- What is the best method for collecting these data; an interview with a key participant, a student survey, a staff survey, a parent survey, a classroom observation? Think about these questions in the context of staff resources/expertise available. It is also important to understand how much of a priority getting these data is relative to your other evaluation activities.
- Who should collect the data? Consider experience, training, familiarity with population, acceptability to population (gender, age, position).

Question Formation & Sequencing

- How much time will interviewees be willing/comfortable spending on your data collection activity? If collection occurs during class time, you also need to consider the amount of time teachers are willing to sacrifice for the purposes of data collection.
- What topics need to be covered by the questions that will be asked? Create a list of the specific data points you need to have collected.
- Do you need to understand the range of possible thoughts/feelings about a particular topic? If so, you likely need to capture that with open-ended questions. Or, are you fairly certain that you have a clear enough understanding that you can provide respondents with a set of known choices?
- What is the best way to word a question to get at each data point? How will the respondents interpret the question and answer options? If you changed the wording slightly, how would that change the interpretation?
- How will the answers to each question inform what you know? Each question should get you closer to capturing what it is you set out to investigate. Carefully consider each item with this in mind, and reword any questions that have an ambiguous connection to the purpose of the research.
- What are the likely responses you'll get for this question? Test this with a few people. For open-ended questions, will you need to follow-up? Are respondents answering a question which is different from the one you intended to ask? For closed-ended questions, review the answer choices to determine if each is relevant and necessary? Do categories make sense in terms of your intended analyses?
- Are the questions balanced? It is important to avoid leading the respondents to particular answers by making your position clear. Do not make it clear to respondents that you hope they answer in a particular way.
- What sequence of questions makes the most sense? In some cases, you may not want to give respondents any hints about what questions are approaching, and you just want to find out what they'll say. However, it might make sense to ask a general question first, and then follow it up with specific related questions afterward.

Adapted from the Center for Evaluation and Research (2012). End Use Strategizing for Creating Data Collection Instruments. Retrieve from <http://tobaccoeval.ucdavis.edu/documents/EndUseStrategizingPacket.pdf>