Survey Design Best Practices for Student Affairs Professionals

GENERAL SURVEY DESIGN

Clearly define the purpose of the survey
Identify exactly what you want to learn. A well-defined purpose guides the structure and content of your questions, ensuring that each item contributes meaningfully to your goals. Doing this early in the planning process helps eliminate unnecessary questions and makes analysis more actionable.

Keep it short, concise, and clear
Respondents are less likely to complete long surveys. Using straightforward language helps maintain engagement with the survey and improve completion rates.

Use consistent rating scales throughout the survey
For example, if you use a 4-point scale to measure agreement (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), maintain a consistent format across all agreement-based questions.

Avoid forcing responses
Ensure that you are using balanced response options, avoid any leading language, provide neutral (or not applicable) answer options, and allow respondents to opt out of questions where possible.

Place difficult-to-answer or sensitive questions near the end of the survey
Place difficult or personal questions near the end of the survey to build trust and increase the likelihood of honest responses.

Test before launching your survey
Have a colleague(s) test your survey to help identify confusing questions/answer options, and test technical issues.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ACCESSIBLE SURVEYS

- Use clear and straightforward language
- Keep the question text brief
- Group similar questions into sections for longer surveys
- Use high-contrast colors (e.g., black text on a white background)
- Avoid grids and matrices, which are difficult for screen readers
- Add text to navigation buttons (e.g., "Previous," "Next")
- Use progress bars, especially for longer surveys
- Follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)

Resource:

[W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#)

SURVEY LANGUAGE

✓ **Minimize the use of acronyms, jargon, or other terms that might not be familiar to all**
Use plain language to ensure clarity and inclusivity, especially for diverse audiences.

✓ **Avoid leading/biased questions**
Frame questions neutrally to avoid influencing responses. Avoid assumptions about respondents' experiences and opinion-based language.

> *Needs Improvement (Biased question):*
> How helpful was the outstanding support you received from Residential Life during this academic year?
>
> *Best Practice (Non-Biased question):*
> How would you rate the support you received from UCLA Residential Life staff during this academic year?

✓ **Provide balanced answer options**
Ensure response choices represent a full range of opinions or experiences and are not skewed toward one side (e.g., more positive answer choices than negative, or vice versa).

✓ **Use non-overlapping, mutually exclusive answer choices**
Make sure options are clearly distinct so that respondents can select the answer that best reflects their experience or opinion.

> *Needs Improvement (Answer choices are not distinct):*
> How many student clubs/organization events did you attend this quarter?
> Answer Choices: 0-2, 2-4, 4-6, 6 or more
>
> *Best Practice (Answer choices are distinct):*
> How many student clubs/organization events did you attend this quarter?
> Answer Choices: 0-1, 2-3, 4-5, 6 or more

✓ **Be specific and define terms**
Use precise wording and clearly define any terms, timeframes, or categories in your questions and answer choices.

> *Needs Improvement (Too Broad/Vague):*
> How satisfied are you with your academic experience?
>
> *Best Practice (Defined time frame):*
> How satisfied are you with the academic advising you received during the Fall quarter?

✓ **Ask one question at a time**
Avoid double-barreled questions. Each question should measure one concept to prevent confusion and ensure clear responses.

Needs Improvement (Double-Barreled question):
- How well did the First Gen Orientation Program prepare you for academic and social life at UCLA during this academic year?

Best Practice (Split questions):
- How well did the First Gen Orientation Program prepare you for academic life at UCLA during this academic year?

- How well did the First Gen Orientation Program prepare you for social life at UCLA during this academic year?

Do you have additional questions about survey design?
Contact the Student Affairs Information and Research Office at sairo@saonet.ucla.edu.