

When to Use a Survey

Thank you for joining the Student Life Studies assessment podcast. Our goal is to educate people about assessment resources and topics, so they can more easily incorporate assessment into their daily lives. Feel free to contact Student Life Studies by calling 979-862-5624, emailing sls@tamu.edu, or coming by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Let's get on with the podcast.

We often get asked to create a survey as the data collection method. That said, a survey is not always the best method, although it has become the default method for data collection. Here are some tips about why you would want to use a survey and why you would not.

A survey is particularly useful when you want to collect information from a relatively large group of people in a relatively short period of time. Web-based surveys can be sent to people around the world who have the convenience to answer the survey at any time of the day or night. Even if you have an in person audience, you can use paper or a QR code to capture feedback in real-time. If most of your questions are quantitative, which I will talk about next, you can collect large amounts of data to be analyzed because statistical analysis software can handle it. Keep in mind that you still want your survey to be focused and relevant to your audience, because respondents will quickly tire of a long survey.

A survey is useful when the information you want to know can be collected quantitatively, typically using a scale or a set of predetermined responses. Typical scales are strongly agree to strongly disagree, always to never, and excellent to poor. You can also create questions that are categorical. For example, academic college, gender, and first generation status are typical categorical questions. Quantitative questions can be analyzed using statistical methods and give you results such as mean, standard deviation, and group comparisons. Surveys can also have open ended questions, but you may not want to create a long survey with only write-in questions. Open ended questions are good when you have predetermined follow up questions or are asking for any additional comments.

If you want to collect data longitudinally, a survey may also be a good solution. You can use the same or similar questions to send out the survey to the same people or same types of people over time. For example, you might want to know initial experiences of new students in the first six weeks of classes. In that case, you might be surveying new students each fall semester. You also might want to follow a group of students from their first year through graduation to see their growth and development over time. You would be surveying the same students at various points in time.

There are also times when a survey is not the best data collection tool. If you really want to understand why or how, and want the ability to ask in the moment follow up questions, a survey is probably not the best data collection method. Surveys are good at getting to the what, but can be challenging if you want to dig deeper into individuals' experiences, perceptions, and opinions. Typically, surveys are a one-time experience, lacking the ability to follow up with respondents to get a deeper understanding of why they answered a particular question the way they did.

Next time you are planning an assessment project, don't fall into the default survey trap. Think about whether the information you really need can be gleaned from a survey. If not, then think about an alternative.

Thanks for listening to today's podcast. Please let us know if this was helpful or if you have additional questions. You can contact us by calling 979-862-5624, emailing sls@tamu.edu, or coming by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Check out our website at studentlifestudies.tamu.edu for more resources and information. We hope to hear from you.