



Office of Institutional Research and Analytics

Survey Research Policy

- I. **Purpose/Rationale:** As technology has made survey development and deployment increasingly easy, surveys have become a go-to strategy for gathering information on all aspects of the Colby College experience. Consequently, many College stakeholders, particularly students, are inundated with requests to complete surveys. The high volume of requests can lead to survey fatigue and decreased response rates. Moreover, the relative simplicity of creating and administering surveys from a technical standpoint does not ensure that they are high quality or appropriate data gathering instruments in all cases. The purpose of this policy is to develop a set of guidelines and procedures to promote effective, efficient, and ethical use of surveys at Colby College.

- II. **Policy Statement:** Any office or individual intending to conduct a survey of a Colby constituency for which they do not have direct responsibility must first contact the Office of Institutional Research and Analytics (IRA). The office takes a leadership role in ensuring the quality and utility of data collected for decision-making at all levels of the College. As surveys are a common data collection tool, IRA has a clear interest in monitoring and evaluating their use throughout the College. The office manages several large-scale surveys of key importance for Colby during the year, and conflicts with these efforts must be minimized.

Please note that this policy is separate from Colby's [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\)](#) policy and procedures. Most standard surveys designed in house to collect information on attitudes, experiences, or other characteristics of Colby populations (e.g., students, faculty, staff) *to support the College's operations* do not require review by Colby's IRB. However, administering a survey developed by an external organization to Colby populations for this purpose may need IRB approval (either by that organization's IRB or Colby's IRB). When in doubt, individuals should contact Colby's IRB to determine if review is necessary before implementing their survey.

- III. **Scope:** This policy applies to anyone looking to conduct a survey of a group of Colby stakeholders for which they do not have direct responsibilities.
 - **Examples of scenarios in which the policy applies include:**
 - An administrator wanting to survey all college employees about interest in an upcoming event.

- A faculty member wanting to survey all students regarding their interest in a new academic program.
- A faculty member wanting to survey all students for a scholarly research project.
- A student wanting to survey a group of students outside of a class they are taking for a course project or independent study.
- An external organization wanting to survey Colby students for a research project.
- **Examples of scenarios in which the policy does NOT apply include:**
 - Faculty surveying students in their class to determine the effectiveness of learning strategies.
 - Students surveying classmates in a class they are taking, provided they have permission of the course instructor.
 - A director surveying their staff about a new departmental initiative.
 - Anyone surveying a non-Colby stakeholder.

IV. Definitions of Common Survey Terms:

- **Anonymous:** When a survey is conducted in such a way that respondents cannot be individually identified. Use this term sparingly. Often, even if individually identifiable information is not collected on a survey or linked in some way to the survey, it still may be possible to identify respondents based on the combination of responses to questions, particularly those related to background characteristics.
- **College Stakeholder:** Anyone with some kind of formal relationship with Colby College, includes currently enrolled students, student applicants, faculty, staff, alumni, and Board of Trustee members. May also include other groups in some cases, such as vendors, community members, state politicians, etc.
- **Confidential:** Refers to the manner in which survey results will be handled once collected; when results are confidential, they are protected so that only certain individuals (namely the survey researcher) knows the identity of individual responses, and those responses are not shared with anyone other than the survey researcher. Confidential surveys are not anonymous; very often, identifying information is collected on the survey or linked to the survey.
- **Direct Responsibility:** Refers to having some authority or oversight over a group of people in a particular context (e.g., faculty have responsibility for students in a class they are teaching, a Director has responsibility for staff they supervise, a student club leader has some responsibility for members of the club they lead).
- **Response Rate:** The percentage of individuals surveyed who respond to the survey (i.e., complete some of all of the survey).
- **Survey:** A data collection tool that consists of questions and is sent to a group of people to complete in order to generate insight on an issue or topic; generally, data from surveys are compiled and shared in the aggregate.
- **Survey Fatigue:** The tendency to avoid responding to surveys, when an individual receives requests to respond to many surveys with little understanding of how such surveys benefit them.

V. Procedures:

- **Planning a survey:** Surveys are complex data collection tools that require time to develop and execute properly. Processing and analyzing survey results can also be time-consuming and complicated. Therefore, surveys should be planned well in advance of when the results are ultimately needed. Before determining whether it is necessary or appropriate to conduct a survey, ask yourself the following questions (note that IRA can help address some of these questions, so please feel free to reach out to the office before planning a survey):
 - Does the data you need already exist somewhere else at Colby?
 - Has a similar survey been conducted at some point by the College or a department/division therein?
 - Is a survey the most appropriate tool for gathering the information you are seeking? Surveys tend to work well when you're trying to get at opinions, attitudes, or assessments of issues. Other strategies may be better for information that is more descriptive or factual in nature.
 - Do you have the resources to develop and administer the survey, as well as process and analyze the results?
- **Contacting Institutional Research and Analytics**—Once you've determined that you wish to proceed with a survey, please contact IRA via the office email (institutionalresearch@colby.edu) and provide the following information:
 - A copy of the proposed survey instrument. If an instrument has not yet been drafted, you may describe the topics you expect to cover in the survey; however, IRA will eventually want to review your instrument.
 - A description of the population (or sample) you are looking to survey (e.g., seniors majoring in a discipline in Natural Sciences)
 - When you intend to conduct the survey.
 - How you intend to administer the survey. Will it be done via email? Will you need a list of names and emails? *Note: students will NOT be given permission to email surveys to large cross-sections of the Colby population.*
 - What you will do to protect the data you are collecting.
 - How and with whom you intend to share the information you gather.
- **Review by Institutional Research and Analytics:**
 - IRA will review the information you have submitted and possibly share the proposed project with members of the senior leadership team for their feedback.
 - Review may take up to two weeks.
 - IRA will inform you of whether the survey can proceed as designed, whether revision is required, or whether the survey should NOT be deployed.

VI. Survey Design Guidelines—Below are some guidelines for developing and deploying effective surveys:

- **Length:** Keep surveys as short as possible, focusing on questions you need to have answered, not ones that are merely “interesting.”

- **Question Placement:** Place the most critical questions near the beginning of the survey. Respondents are more likely to respond to questions early in the survey and begin to lose interest the longer the instrument becomes.
- **Demographic Questions:** Be careful including these questions.
 - First, are you going to use the information when analyzing the results? If not, don't ask for it.
 - Second, if a survey does NOT need to be anonymous, it is possible to pre-load some of the demographic information into the survey, so that they don't need to appear on the survey.
 - Third, always place these kinds of questions at the end of the survey. They are not your core questions, and some respondents may be turned off by them and refuse to complete the survey entirely.
- **Developing Questions:**
 - *Use language responders will understand.* If any questions have terms in them that are unfamiliar to many, be certain to provide definitions.
 - *Avoid double-barreled questions* (e.g., "I am satisfied with the quality and quantity of the food offered in the dining hall."). Such questions are hard to answer and hard to analyze, as how does one respond if one of the two elements is satisfactory and the other is not? An individual survey question should get a single concept.
 - *Don't ask questions that imply you might take some action that you are unable to follow through on* (ex., To what extent would you like Colby College to begin offering graduate programs?)
 - *Make sure that scales correspond with the phrasing of your questions.* If you're asking respondents to "rate" something, the scale should be something like "Excellent," "Good," "Satisfactory," etc. If you're asking them whether they are satisfied with something, the scale should be "Very Satisfied," "Satisfied," etc.
 - *Make sure your scales are relatively well balanced and are not heavily weighted on the positive or negative side* (i.e., avoid scales like "Exceptional," "Excellent," "Very Good," "Good," "Poor"). You may or may not want a "neutral" category; "neutral" categories often become a default response when respondents do not want to think too carefully about a question. It may be good, instead, to include a "not applicable" option that respondents can select when they really are unable to respond to a particular question.
 - *Use open-ended questions sparingly.* They are difficult to analyze, and respondents often spend a considerable amount of time responding to them only to have them not fully analyzed or not analyzed at all. Try to think of possible responses to questions you have and write them as close-ended questions. It is always possible to offer an "other" choice that allows respondents to write in their response. Be careful of open-ended questions that may encourage respondents to name and/or evaluate individuals, unless the intent of your question is to collect such feedback.

- **Administering the Survey:**
 - *Consider taking a sample rather than administering the survey to the entire population of interest.* By sampling, you have a more manageable group of subjects to work with, and folks in populations that are regularly targeted with surveys are less likely to receive requests to complete multiple surveys. IRA can help you with sampling.
 - *Incentives:* If an incentive will be offered to promote response to a survey, it is important to select one that is not going to bias responses (e.g., prompt respondent to respond more favorably to questions than they might otherwise). Also, when the survey is complete, be sure to inform all respondents of the status of the incentive, so they know you actually followed through with it. Respondents should be asked to opt in to consideration for the incentive, and if it is something that only some individuals will receive, you should inform them that you are planning to announce the winners to all respondents.
 - *Surveys should generally be presented as voluntary.* If a survey is presented as mandatory, you should consider whether it is actually possible to enforce its completion.
 - *You should be very clear on whether the survey is anonymous or confidential and how you intend to use the results.* Recall that promising anonymity is often not possible. A statement such as “Your individual responses will not be publicly identified with you in any way” is recommended. This is generally a safe statement to make that ensures that no one, other than the researcher, knows what an individual said on a particular question but allows for some flexibility in how responses can be used. For example, researchers often like to include representative responses to open-ended questions in reports and presentations. Doing so could be perceived as problematic if respondents were simply told that their responses will not be *shared* publicly. By saying that responses won’t be *identified with* respondents publicly, you can still share their responses, as long as no one knows they were the ones that provided those responses.