Standards for Survey Methodologies

Institutional Surveys at Memorial University

Developed by the Centre for Institutional Analysis and Planning on behalf of the Institutional Survey Oversight Committee, Memorial University, and intended for members of the Memorial University community only (Last updated May 2022)

This document outlines standards and best practices for institutional survey methodologies at Memorial University, as specifically referenced in the Design and Methodology section of the *Procedure for Administering Institutional Surveys* and in accordance with the *Institutional Surveys* policy. Users should consult the other sections of the *Procedure for Administering Institutional Surveys* for direction on all other aspects of survey administration including privacy and information management guidelines. **This is an evolving document and standards will be updated as required, so users are encouraged to check regularly to ensure the most current content is accessed.**

A Note on the Memorial University Survey Tool:
The current approved survey tool for Memorial University is Qualtrics (www.mun.ca/surveysolution) which is available to employees for the administration of surveys approved through the *Institutional Surveys* policy. The features available in Qualtrics are extensive and users are strongly advised to view the how-to videos and tutorials available in the help site to determine the settings and features to apply to a particular survey. While this standards document will reference certain Qualtrics functionality as it relates to best practices for design and methodology, it is not a technical guide or how-to reference for the survey tool.

Survey Planning and Development

Instrument Design

When developing a survey instrument it is important to give careful consideration to how the information collected will be analyzed and used (e.g., can action be taken based on the information). The resources that will be available for analysis and the timeframes that are to be met are also important factors when determining the number and type of questions that will comprise the instrument. Structured response or scale items take less time for respondents to complete and are easier to analyze and report than written or open-ended type questions, but in some cases may not provide the level of detail needed or meet the purpose of a particular survey.

Some general factors to keep in mind when designing a survey instrument include the following:

- Only ask questions that are clearly tied to the survey's goals and objectives.
- Do not include questions if there can be no action taken on the results or if they cannot be analyzed in a meaningful way.
- Keep questions specific so that conclusions can be drawn from them.
- Collection of personal information should be limited to only what is necessary for the survey.
- Keep the instrument short so that it requires no more than 10 minutes to complete.
- Test the instrument with a small group before making the survey live, as this can help identify any issues with question flow, wording or length.

Privacy Notice

All institutional surveys must include a Privacy Notice. The exact content of the notice will depend on the nature of the survey, but it should inform potential participants of the collection, use, retention and disclosure of the information being collected. It must also include the contact information for the individual to whom questions about the survey can be directed. There are recommended Privacy Notices for institutional surveys at Memorial that can be used or adapted.

The Privacy Notice should state any particular conditions or details related to the information collected that would be important for participants to know before they participate, including such things as:

- Specific individuals who will have access to the data.
- All anticipated uses of the information.
- If there is a possibility that direct quotes will be included in reporting.

Creating Survey Questions

Individuals developing questions for a survey instrument are encouraged to consult the many resources available on this topic. The CIAP office can also provide assistance in this area, but such assistance is resource and time dependent.

Best practices should be followed when developing questions for institutional surveys, and a summary of some common considerations for question design can be reviewed prior to creating an instrument. Surveys intended for Memorial University populations will often include demographic questions, and recommended wording and formatting for common demographic questions is available.

For qualitative or written comment questions, respondents should be reminded not to write anything that could identify themselves or others (this text is included in the recommended Privacy Notices for institutional surveys). In cases where responses to demographic questions could cause small subgroups to emerge or respondents to be identified, lead-in text for these questions is recommended to inform

respondents that they may leave any demographics questions blank if they are concerned they could be identified by a combination of their responses.

It is recommended that immediately following the final survey question a descriptive text item be added that alerts respondents that they have reached the end of the survey questions, and that by clicking the arrow to advance to the next page their responses will be submitted as complete and they will not have an opportunity to change their submission. A progress bar can also be added to indicate to respondents how far along they are and when they are nearing the end of the survey.

Survey Introduction/Invitation

An introduction should be provided to potential participants to fully inform them of the survey so that they can decide if they want to participate. It will also include the Privacy Notice. For some surveys the introduction may be in the form of an email invitation, while in other cases the introduction will be included as the first page of the survey prior to the start of the questions. For limited access/personalized link surveys that involve an email invitation, it is recommended that this invitation contain the full introductory information concerning the survey. For open-access/general link surveys it is recommended that the full introductory information be included as the first page of the survey instrument as there is no guarantee that all participants will receive the invitation in a consistent manner. Note that even when an invitation is used, the privacy notice (at minimum) should be repeated at the beginning or on the first page of the instrument as well.

A survey introduction template is available to guide the design of the survey invitation/introduction, as per the Required Protocols and Documents section of the *Procedure for Administering Institutional Surveys*. If the survey administration will include sending a reminder message, the content of this reminder can be the same as that of the invitation using a subject line that references 'Reminder', or it can be a distinctly written reminder message.

Whenever possible, an estimate of the time it will take to complete the survey should be included in the introduction so respondents can consider this in their decision to participate.

Prize Draws and Sign-Up Forms

Some surveys may offer an incentive for participation or seek to engage participants in follow-up activities such as focus groups, panels or sessions. Survey participants should be able to choose whether or not they wish to participate in these options separately from their consent to participate in the survey. If the survey is anonymous, respondents will have to provide their contact information (typically name and email address) for the purpose of the draw or other follow-up activity. Any personal information provided by survey participants for these purposes should not be connected to their individual survey responses and should be collected using a separate form that is disassociated from the main survey instrument. A sign-up form template is available for these follow-up activities.

If using incentives or prize draws the following practices should be followed:

- The prize must be appropriate as per the University's purchasing policy.
- The winner(s) should be selected/identified as soon as possible following the close date of the survey administration. The winner(s) should be notified via their University email address (when applicable) and given details on how and when to claim their prize. It is recommended that a deadline of 30 days be given to claim a prize, and that a protocol be established for what to do in the case of an unclaimed prize(s).
- The identity of prize draw winners for a survey should not be announced/published in any form.

Survey Administration

Population and Sampling

The target population for a survey should be clearly defined, with all relevant parameters specified if the population is to be selected from University systems. For student populations, relevant parameters might include level, campus, full/part-time status, program, admission type, or registration semester.

It should be determined if all members of the population will be invited to participate (census) or if a selected portion of the target population will be invited to participate (sample). The decision to carry out a survey by sampling or census should be based upon the size of the target population, the purpose of the survey, and the intended use of the results.

Survey Distribution

Access to a survey can be set up as either open or limited. For a survey with **open access (general link),** a single URL is used by everyone to access the survey, and this link can be advertised in a general way (for example, through Newsline or the Gazette) or sent by email to everyone in the target population. For a survey with **limited access (personalized link),** a unique or controlled URL link is provided by email to each individual in the target population, which they can then use to access and complete the survey only once. Limited access requires that respondents be identifiable, although identifiers can be removed at a subsequent stage. The level of access to provide for a survey should be determined based on the population, the topic of the survey, anonymity considerations, and the level of control needed over administration. Key options associated with each access type is summarized in the table that follows. Users of Qualtrics should become familiar with the options that are available related to anonymity, access and tracking to ensure the appropriate survey settings are selected for a particular survey.

Administrative Options by Survey Access Type		
Administrative Options	Open access (general link)	Limited access (personalized link)
Invitation can be sent through general messaging	Yes	No
Invitation can be sent through individual email address	Yes	Yes
Allows for general reminder(s)	Yes	Yes
Allows for customized reminder(s)	No	Yes
Demographics can be asked on questionnaire	Yes	Yes
Allows linkage to demographics/data from administrative system(s)	No	Yes
Anonymous	Yes	No[*]
Confidential	Yes	Yes
Allows multiple entries/submissions from a single individual	Yes	No
Allows for prize draw (please see section 'Prize Draws and Sign-Up Forms' for more details on handling personal information in a prize draw)	Yes, if contact information supplied as separate question	Yes

[*] A personalized link can optionally be set up to record that a response has been made but not associate the response to personal information.

Survey access type is closely related to the level of anonymity required for the survey and the distinction between anonymous and confidential should be considered.

- ***Confidential*** means an individual's survey responses will be handled in confidence by designated staff of the administering unit and will only be shared outside of this limited group in a summarized form.
- ***Anonymous*** means survey responses are collected in the absence of any personally identifiable information and cannot be systematically linked back to the respondent.

Note: For surveys that include open-ended/comments questions, the content of written responses could identify the respondent or another person even if the survey is designed to be anonymous.

Messaging and Communication

Survey populations may be contacted directly or indirectly depending on the nature of the survey. With direct contact, a survey invitation message is sent to an individual email address by the survey host, or to members of an email distribution list by a university unit. A direct contact approach can be used for either an open or a limited access survey. With indirect contact, a survey invitation message is sent in a general way through community channels (e.g., Newsline, Messenger, Twitter, Facebook, Memorial webpage, posters, flyers, etc.). An indirect contact approach can only be used for an open access survey. For surveys with direct contact involving a Memorial population, invitations must be sent to the individual's university email account. Email addresses recorded on Memorial University systems are protected by the *Information and Protection of Privacy Act, 2015, SNL 2015, CA-1.2.*

Administration Timeframes

For surveys involving the university community, the semester cycles of the academic year along with the target population for the survey will influence the timeframe for administration. A consideration for ISOC survey approval will be whether there are other surveys in the field at the same proposed time directed to a similar population or addressing a similar question, as this could impact the response rates obtained.

Surveys for Memorial students and faculty are best planned to take place during the regular fall or winter semester. During the spring semester, individuals may access their Memorial email account with less frequency or be less available in general, and this may lead to lower response rates. The last two weeks of lectures in a semester are not recommended for administration of a student survey due to ongoing administration of course evaluations at that time each semester.

It will need to be determined how long the survey will be available for completion and how often participation reminders will be provided (where applicable). This may be influenced by the desired response rate for the survey and the timeframe for the overall survey project. For most surveys within the university community, an administration period of three weeks is recommended, with an initial invitation scheduled on the start day and a reminder message scheduled mid-way through the administration period. For administration periods longer than three weeks, a second reminder can be scheduled towards the end of the administration period.

Analysis and Reporting

Data Validation and Preparation

Since the recommended Privacy Notices for institutional surveys at Memorial state that participants can end their participation at any time during the survey by closing their browser window, only survey submissions that are recorded as **complete** should be included in data analysis and reports. Qualtrics users should familiarize themselves with the different options for how the system handles closing a survey and partially completed entries, so that data is selected appropriately for analysis.

The data file of survey results should be reviewed carefully before analysis begins in order to identify any anomalies and ensure proper coding/labeling of responses. Even with responses filtered for completed submissions only, the decision to include a case in final data analysis when the respondent has only answered a very small proportion of questions or has submitted their responses after the deadline should be made at the discretion of the survey administrator, taking into account the survey length, purpose and use.

Considerations for Analysis and Reporting

In order to confidently use survey results and draw conclusions from the information collected, the resulting sample of survey respondents should be of sufficient size based on the larger population and be comparable to the target population on key demographics (representative of the larger group). This is of particular concern if the intention is to generalize the results of a survey to a larger population. Due to potential biases associated with both sample and census surveys, respondents may not reflect the target population so the representativeness of the responding group should be checked against the larger population in terms of key demographic characteristics before data analysis begins. Any discrepancies in proportions and their impact on interpretation of the results should be noted.

Quantitative analysis of survey data may include frequencies (percentages) and means (averages) or other numeric summaries appropriate to the questions. Qualitative analysis of survey data may include categorizing written responses by main themes.

In reporting survey results, the following practices are recommended:

- Only report aggregated/summary statistics and not individual results.
- Ensure respondents cannot be identified through combinations of their responses to different questions, or by the comments they provide to any qualitative questions.
- Results for sub-groups with fewer than 10 respondents should be excluded from reporting.
- Written comments to open-ended questions should not be reported in their verbatim form and should be summarized appropriately (themed, categorized, paraphrased) to ensure they cannot be attributed to an individual.
- Including select direct quotes in reports for illustrative purposes should only be done if individuals were informed of this possibility before they completed the survey.
- Results should not be used or reported in a manner that is not consistent with what was described to participants in the Privacy Statement.
- Any limitations or considerations to be aware of when interpreting and drawing conclusions from the data should be outlined in all survey reports.
- The methods selected for analysis should be appropriate for the data collected.
- The format of the survey report should be determined by who the audience of the report will be, how the report will be distributed (internally or externally), and how the results will be utilized (formal versus informal presentation of the results).