

Assessment 101: Assessment Tips with Gloria Rogers, Ph.D. Surveys and Questionnaires: Do They Measure Up?

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The single most used and abused assessment method is the locally developed survey. Surveys are conducted of students, faculty, recruiters, employers, alumni, and advisory boards. Before send out that survey, have you considered what constitutes an effective survey? The results will only be as good as the planning and quality of the survey instrument. Here are some tips to effective surveying:

1) Plan ahead. Objectivity is very important in survey development. Plan the survey carefully to reduce the likelihood of bias in questions asked or sample surveyed. Focus clearly on the key questions you want answered. If the survey developer does not have experience in survey construction, have the survey reviewed by someone with the appropriate expertise. Decide whether you will need to survey a population (i.e., everyone in the study group) or if a sample (i.e., a purposeful selection representative of the study group) will meet your needs.

2) Construct survey items carefully. There are many different formats available for survey items. It is important to construct items that are clearly understood. Keep items short and to the point. Compound (single items that contain more than one question) or complex questions are confusing and make responses impossible to interpret. Avoid loaded and/or leading questions (e.g., “Do you believe you were well-prepared to enter the workforce?”).

3) Pilot the survey. Once the survey has been completed, ask a small group representative of the population to be studied to take the survey. If you are surveying students, have a select few to take the survey. (Of course, pizza is a must!) Then, conduct a focus group to identify any concerns they might have about the survey. If you are surveying alumni, get a group of graduate students who were undergraduates in the program. Be creative in how to effectively “test” the survey for clarity and relevance.

4) Maximize the likelihood of response. If the survey is being mailed, be creative to increase the likelihood of an acceptable response rate. If the survey is well-planned, it will be direct and clear, and the study group will be appropriate. Keep the instrument short. If the survey must be lengthy, consider creating two versions and giving half to one part of the study group and the

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other half to the rest of the group, being sure that the demographics of the two groups are the same. Although this will take forethought, it will likely increase the response rate. The same applies to an “on-line” survey, with the added responsibility to be sure that those surveyed have the likelihood of access to the survey and that the survey interface is user-friendly.

5) Analyze survey results in an appropriate manner. Remember, you are not doing social science research in the truest sense. In most cases, descriptive statistics is all that you need to use. You may choose to show your results by cohort groups or for different years, but generally, sophisticated statistical analysis is not required.

6) Report and evaluate findings. Although this step is the least time consuming, it is one of the most important aspects of the process. If it is assumed that the survey instrument has been carefully constructed, pilot tested, administered, and analyzed, then how and to whom the results are reported becomes critical. Reports should be easy for a layperson to read and presented with an executive summary.

Statistical jargon should be avoided. Where appropriate, implications of the findings should be clearly articulated. Reports should be made to those most directly affected by the results and who are able to evaluate the findings and take action on any recommendations made.