

## Thinking about conducting a survey? Before you do, consider...

The average Swattie will have completed *at least* 10 institutional surveys by the time he or she graduates. In addition, they receive many other surveys from departments, groups, and other students.

As community members (students, faculty, and staff) become weary of surveys, every survey can reduce the participation in those that follow. Poorly designed, badly timed, and redundant surveys make matters even worse. As response rates drop, survey data become meaningless. Before conducting a survey, ask yourself these questions.

### Do you *really* need to conduct a survey?

\_\_ Is there no other way to get the information you seek? Interviews, focus groups, and good conversations can be valid ways of gathering information. A similar survey may have already been conducted, or other data may already exist that could address your questions. Visit "Alternatives to Surveys" at the web site listed below for ideas.

\_\_ Will the responses you get provide important, usable information? Curiosity alone or resolving a debate may not be good reasons for conducting a survey, at least not within a small community such as ours whose members receive multiple survey requests.

\_\_ Are you very clear about what you want to know? It is unfair to ask people for their time before you have figured it out.

**If you answered YES to every item above, a survey *might* be reasonable, but...**

\_\_ Have you checked in with the Institutional Research office? They maintain a list of recent and active surveys to help coordinate efforts.

\_\_ Do you know how to conduct a survey? It takes more than a Survey Monkey account to develop a good survey. If you're not experienced, learn or consult an expert. It is inappropriate to use our community members as guinea pigs while you learn.

\_\_ If you are a student, has an experienced faculty or staff member reviewed and approved your survey?

\_\_ Have you checked in with the appropriate office (e.g. Dean of Students, major department, Provost, Alumni Office) for the population you wish to target? There may be programs, issues, or events that your survey could impact, and vice versa.

\_\_ Have you checked in with our Research Ethics Committee for approval? The committee serves as the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which reviews proposals for research involving human subjects to insure that the research meets ethical standards for the protection of the subjects. (Go to <http://www.swarthmore.edu/Admin/irb/HumanSubjectsResearch.html> for more information)

**For more information, tips, and best practices, go to Swarthmore's Institutional Research webpage at <http://www.swarthmore.edu/ir> and click on "Survey Support."**

These are the kinds of activities that are NOT GENERALLY A CONCERN.	These are the kinds of things that CAN BE A PROBLEM.
<p>Course evaluations.</p> <p>Department surveys of students or alumni aimed at improving the academic program. .</p>	<p>Student course projects in which students conduct surveys of students not in the course.</p> <p>Multiple surveys covering similar topics, conducted by different student groups or offices at the College.</p>

**Alternatives to surveys:**

Focus groups, interviews, conversations - These face-to-face techniques can be structured to provide very useful information; they may also allow for probing and follow-up to capture nuances very difficult to learn with a traditional survey. These strategies may eliminate the need to conduct a survey, or may at least inform and hone the questions that need to be included on a survey. Be aware that focus groups and interviews are formal data collection techniques and conducting them properly will greatly increase their effectiveness.

Institutional data - Community members can draw on existing information available through the Institutional Research office about many things, e.g. athletics participation, changes of major, advanced degrees earned, etc .

Collect other (non-survey) data - Record performance indicators or other information, which might be compared against a goal. E.g., rather than asking students if they are satisfied with how quickly transcript requests are processed, record the processing time for a period. Are the results acceptable? Rather than asking graduating seniors about their applications to graduate school, determine this information based on students' requests for letters of recommendation.

Alternative assessment techniques - Workshops and other instructional or service activities lend themselves particularly well to assessments beyond satisfaction surveys. Think about the outcomes you'd like to see, and then find creative ways to determine if they happen. Some ideas are:

- Embed an exercise near the end of a workshop that demonstrates learning of the key points. Participants' aggregate performance on the exercise will reflect the effectiveness of the workshop.
- Find behaviors that link to the goals of the activity, and see if those behaviors differ for participants and non-participants, or before and after the activity. For example, do calls to the ITS help desk decrease after an awareness campaign about malware; are requests for residence hall room changes lower for students who participated in conflict-resolution training than for those who did not.
- Determine the relative effectiveness of different formats for outreach or advertising by having participants indicate when they register, call, or sign in how they learned of the activity.