

In recent years, college administrators have become concerned with survey fatigue among students and declining response rates. Some campuses have responded by implementing policies about who can conduct surveys and which topics are permitted. This chapter describes the development of such policies and provides valuable suggestions to campus administrators.

Survey Research Policies: An Emerging Issue for Higher Education

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Many campuses are struggling with the issue of who can survey on their campus, which groups can be surveyed, and which survey methodologies and topics are permitted. Administrators are concerned about survey fatigue among students and have begun to monitor the number of student surveys in a given year. One campus has even gone so far as to prevent a tenured faculty member from surveying undergraduate students on campus simply because the survey topic was considered too controversial (Wilson, 2002). Institutional Review Boards (IRBs; also known as Human Subjects Committees) have increasingly asserted that surveys are experimentation on human subjects and thus fall under their purview. Some schools, for example, must now obtain a consent form signed by the parents of students under age eighteen before the school can administer the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) precollege survey to these students.

Two forces are behind the newly contentious issue of who can survey on our campuses. First, the response rate in many higher education surveys has been dropping (Porter, 2004), which has made it more difficult and costlier to collect quality survey data on our campuses. Much of this trend has been attributed to survey fatigue and growing cynicism among students, and institutions are beginning to view student cooperation with surveys as a scarce and valuable resource that should be used wisely. This issue has become more prominent as schools discover that multiple offices within the institution are surveying students at the same time—often on similar topics.

The second force is that IRBs have taken a more aggressive approach toward both social science and practitioner research during the past decade

(American Association of University Professors, 2005; Kancelbaum, 2002; Pritchard, 2002). Even oral history interviews by historians and articles by English professors have come under the scrutiny of IRBs on some campuses (Brainard, 2003a). As a primary social science research tool involving human subjects, surveys have inevitably invited scrutiny by IRBs. It is important to realize that these two trends will not disappear any time soon; to the contrary, they are likely to increase in the future, especially with the growing popularity of Web surveys.

This chapter discusses many of the issues that any campuswide survey research policy must address. Although establishing a policy for conducting surveys on a campus may seem a simple task, the problem is multidimensional and competing goals are not easily reconciled. Often a solution for one campus does not work for another campus because of differences in mission, organizational structure, or culture. To illustrate how campuses have developed varying policies in this area, this chapter describes survey research policies at Bucknell University; Duke University; Northwestern University; and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

What Is a Survey Research Policy?

I define a survey research policy as any campus rule concerning administration of surveys in which members of the campus community are the survey sample. It could be as simple as the absence of rules; that is, surveys might be conducted by anyone without oversight from an IRB or any other administrative body. These rules may also be complex, describing which specific campus constituencies interested in conducting a survey must have prior approval of the provost and which must have IRB approval, with the approval process dependent on the campus groups that are in the proposed survey sample.

Note that this definition is concerned with surveys of campus constituencies, not with how members of the campus community survey individuals not associated with the institution. Most schools already have policies in place that require IRB review for researchers who are surveying noncampus populations; these rules are generally accepted and in many cases have been in place for years.

It is important to distinguish between two entirely different types of administrative survey review. The first is conducted by an IRB, and the second by what we normally think of as the university administration, such as the provost's office or the institutional research office. Because members of the IRB are usually appointed by the administration, it can technically be called an administrative review. But an IRB is an independent arm of the administration, because it makes its decisions without conferring with the campus administration. In addition, it is generally only concerned with protecting the participants in a proposed survey. Political or practical concerns such as survey fatigue are not addressed by the IRB. Thus, even though the IRB is

technically part of the administration, because of its unique role I consider it a separate body in terms of survey research policy. When referring to administrative approval in this chapter, I am referring to the role played by the provost or other members of the campus administration, not the IRB.

Why Have a Survey Research Policy?

There are several reasons schools are moving toward establishing a formal policy on conducting survey research on their campus. They can be grouped in three general areas: ethical, legal, and practical.

Ethical Concerns. Protection of human subjects is one of the most common reasons for a school to develop rules for survey administration. IRBs have widened their scope (see the discussion in Chapter Two), and publicity over the poor treatment of subjects in medical research has also heightened campus perceptions of how we treat members of our communities. Some of the traditional methods that institutional researchers have used to conduct surveys, such as administering them to a captive audience or tying survey participation to a graduation ticket, are now viewed by some as coercive techniques.

Most of the discussion in this area focuses on informing subjects that their participation in the survey is voluntary, as well as heightened emphasis on what is done with the data and who will have access to the data. A primary concern of IRBs—ensuring that subjects are informed of potential hazards or injury—is less applicable to survey research; most researchers would agree that the potential for direct harm to the individual is small (see, for example, American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2003).

A recent survey of institutional researchers indicates that most institutions do not require administrative surveys to undergo IRB review (Westermeyer, 2004). Administrative surveys are declared exempt because the goal of the survey is not to publish a scientific research paper but instead to furnish information for internal assessment and planning purposes. However, these exemptions are somewhat questionable; they say nothing about the process of gathering data, clearly an IRB concern. In addition, voluntary participation is widely recognized as one of the components of informed consent (Fischman, 2000). As an example of the risks associated with mandatory surveys, medical schools recently became the target of a federal ethics complaint by the group Public Citizen because participation in a student exit survey was made a condition of graduation (Brainard, 2003b).

A second area of ethical concern is the impact of survey research policies on academic freedom, one of the core values of the academy. Any policy that restricts the ability of faculty or students to engage in research can raise issues of academic freedom. The right of IRBs to review proposed faculty and student research is widely recognized, but the role of administrative involvement and its boundaries are less clear.

Privacy rights of campus constituencies also become an issue when conducting surveys. A member of the campus community might request that schools make available mailing or e-mail addresses of all students for the purpose of conducting a survey. If the addresses are provided to any requester, it is not clear that safeguards can be established to prevent this contact information from being used for marketing or other purposes. Privacy rights and concern over misuse of e-mail addresses was one reason cited by Wharton for declining to release e-mail addresses of students to *Business Week* (Miller, 2004). Those who request contact information may also ask for additional demographic and academic background information on individuals to be used for a weighting scheme to correct for survey nonresponse. These requests may not violate Family Educational and Privacy Rights Act restrictions, but many students are unhappy that their contact and background information are being furnished to other students or faculty.

Finally, students are often regarded as a special case meriting caution in how they are treated. Students are much younger than faculty, staff, and alumni and may be under eighteen, the commonly recognized age of consent. In addition, because of the academic and administrative power that faculty and staff have over students, care must be taken that students not feel unduly influenced by this power relationship when approached for survey participation. Survey research policies may specify, for example, that surveys of students receive greater scrutiny than surveys of faculty, staff, or alumni.

Legal Concerns. In addition to ethical concerns, a survey research policy may aid in avoiding, and defending against, a lawsuit. Requiring all surveys to go through an IRB, for example, demonstrates that an institution has taken active steps to ensure that survey participants do not undergo any harm and are not coerced into participating in an activity they may find objectionable. Although the typical institutional survey (such as a student satisfaction survey) has only limited potential for harm, other surveys that ask detailed questions about, say, sexual behavior or illegal activities such as underage drinking and drug use pose more of a problem. Survey research policies can help avoid the accusation that an institution has been negligent in this area.

Practical Concerns. Survey fatigue is an increasing concern for institutions, especially smaller ones. Repeated surveying of students has been shown to reduce the response rates in later surveys (Porter, Whitcomb, and Weitzer, 2004), so coordinating and prioritizing surveys can be crucial for a smaller school. The approach taken by Bucknell University, for example, explicitly recognizes this: "The Bucknell community is capitalizing on the usefulness of survey research; however, repeated assessment of the same group can jeopardize the quality of the data that we all require. Through scheduling and review of survey content, our goal is to meet the needs of those interested in administering surveys while avoiding the over surveying of campus constituents" (Bucknell University, n.d.).

Quality of the collected data is a second area that survey research policies can address. Here, the issue goes beyond avoiding multiple surveys and their effect on data collection. Instead, the focus is on ensuring that surveys are designed and conducted in a professional manner, and in such a way as to yield reliable and valid results. For example, a large research university may not be concerned about survey fatigue given the number of students; however, it might stipulate that surveys conducted by various offices and departments for assessment purposes be done well and not be a waste of institutional resources.

Administrative workload is a third area of concern. Some schools do not have the resources to fulfill every survey request, and a survey research policy can help spell out under what conditions survey assistance is provided to students or faculty who wish to conduct a survey.

Fourth, keeping track of survey research and survey analyses conducted by administrative offices and academic departments, as well as establishing priorities for data collection efforts, is more important as demands for assessment grow. Accreditation bodies want to see an ongoing program of assessment and planning, and surveys conducted by administrative offices and academic departments are part of a body of evidence that should be archived. Having a group on campus that serves as a clearinghouse for survey research allows the campus administration to know what surveys are conducted and to keep track of important ones. A theme that came out of my discussion with the institutional researchers at the case study schools is that surveys are often conducted by administrative offices, yet chief academic officers and administrators involved in assessment never hear about them.

A final area of concern involves competing analyses that might arise from multiple surveys conducted on the same topic; this is more political than anything else. Survey research results are often used to inform planning or make judgments about an administrative office, or an entire institution. Thus who can survey, how the survey is conducted, and how the resulting data are analyzed can be very important, especially to an institution sensitive about its image. For example, Harvard Business School, which disagreed with a rankings methodology that was based on surveys of its students, recently refused to release contact information so that the students could be surveyed by *Business Week* magazine (Bartlett, 2004).

Case Studies

In June 2004, I conducted interviews with institutional researchers at four colleges about their survey research policies: why they were put into place, what they cover, who is responsible for reviewing surveys, and how they have worked since implementation.

Duke University. Duke's survey research policy developed during the late 1990s as various offices began to administer competing surveys (D. Jamieson-Drake, personal communication, June 16, 2004). For example,

the College of Arts and Sciences administered a survey to its students at the same time that institutional research was administering another, leaving many students confused about which survey they had filled out. The administration also became concerned about response rates and saw the need to coordinate student surveys.

A two-pronged approach evolved, depending on the student sample and the office administering the survey. Under a policy developed by the Institutional Research Coordinating Committee, surveys of the entire student body (or samples from the student body) need the approval of the provost or vice president of student affairs, while surveys by administrative offices of students under their purview generally do not need approval. For example, a general exit survey of graduating seniors would need committee approval; one distributed by library staff to students in the library would not. Administrative surveys need IRB review only if they are used for scientific research. On the other hand, because it is put to research purposes, the CIRP first-year survey must undergo IRB review.

The coordinating committee has members from offices that often need to administer surveys, such as the dean of the college, auxiliary services, student affairs, and institutional research. The committee meets *ad hoc*, usually two to four times a year, and uncontroversial surveys are often assessed only by Institutional Research.

The Duke policy has focused more on positive incentives rather than on a punitive approach. The policy has been enforced through administrative control of contact information. If someone wishing to administer a survey would like a student sample with names and addresses, the requester must submit the survey for review. Faculty and students desiring contact information or other survey assistance must submit their survey for review; the Institutional Research office occasionally offers assistance for these surveys.

Northwestern University. As with Duke, the Student Surveys Planning Group at Northwestern University first began meeting in the early 1990s (B. Hayward, personal communication, June 15, 2004). The group formed for several reasons, among them conflicting survey efforts, both in terms of survey content and timing, and a sense that surveys were being conducted by individual offices without reference to institutional priorities.

The Northwestern policy covers only surveys of students; the provost's office tends to act as a gatekeeper for other types. The group meets three times a year, during the fall, winter, and spring terms, with the goal of not only reviewing student surveys for administration but also setting the institutional agenda for student survey research. The group comprises representatives from student affairs, enrollment management, alumni relations, institutional research, the graduate school, and the various undergraduate schools. Administrative surveys at Northwestern are not required to undergo review by the IRB, because the goal is not scholarly research.

Persons outside the administration, such as students or faculty, must submit a survey request to the group if they want any kind of administrative

assistance. The group has turned down requests for surveys on the basis of the topic of the survey or the survey population.

Bucknell University. The survey research policy at Bucknell University was put into place during the 2000–01 academic year, after the administration noticed that the volume of survey activity on campus was increasing (K. Martin, personal communication, June 15, 2004). As the earlier quote indicates, Bucknell is aware that the small student body leaves the students particularly vulnerable to survey fatigue, and this is also one of the concerns that underlies the creation of their policy.

The Bucknell approach covers only surveys conducted by administrative offices; the institution has not tried to coordinate assessments by academic departments. The Campus Survey Coordination Group meets once at the beginning of every academic year to discuss proposed administrative surveys and to create a survey schedule for the academic year. Rather than accepting or rejecting surveys, the goal of the group is to develop a schedule that avoids overlapping and duplicative surveys, while also minimizing oversurveying of students. At Bucknell, administrative surveys are not required to undergo IRB review.

As with similar groups at Duke and Northwestern, the coordination group at Bucknell has members from administrative offices that often conduct surveys. The group included representatives from residential life, health services, the dean of students' office, and institutional research. The coordination group generally does not handle survey requests from faculty or students; these requests have been relatively uncommon and are handled by institutional research individually.

To date, the policy has worked well, and the academic officers have even seen a benefit to the policy: by requiring offices to submit survey requests at the beginning of the academic year, the officers are forced to engage in more long-term planning. The only issues have been with publicizing the policy and the existence of the coordination group among administrative offices. Currently Bucknell is considering replacing it with an assessment planning group. This new committee would not only be responsible for reviewing requests for administrative surveys but also administering and analyzing the surveys.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County. UMBC has a broad survey research policy that was implemented in the spring of 2004 after two years of discussion (N. L. Ochsner, personal communication, June 16, 2004). As with the other case study schools, UMBC found that administrative offices were carrying out competing surveys to the same groups of students. On one occasion, members from two administrative offices stood outside the university bookstore at the same time and tried to survey seniors—with the two surveys containing many of the same questions. Further, the administration was unaware of who was conducting surveys on campus, or how often they were conducted.

Under the policy, the Campus Assessment Coordinating Committee is tasked with reviewing surveys. Anyone wishing to do a survey of UMBC

students, staff, faculty, or alumni that requires contact information on individuals (such as names, addresses, or telephone numbers) is required to gain the committee's approval first. Other surveys, however, such as those handed out by faculty in a classroom, do not fall under their purview. There is no official IRB exemption for administrative surveys; all surveys at UMBC are required to undergo IRB review.

Similar to groups at the other case study schools, the committee at UMBC comprises representatives from offices that often conduct surveys for assessment and planning (institutional research, academic affairs, student affairs, institutional advancement).

Discussion

As IRB reviews become more extensive and wide-ranging, and the pressure for additional surveys on our campuses increases, survey research policies are becoming more common. These policies add another layer of bureaucracy, but they serve a useful purpose: they can address the ethical, legal, and practical concerns about survey research that many campuses face.

From the schools described here, we can see some common themes describing why these schools adopted survey research policies and why they took the shape they did. First, the policies are a recent development and evolved because of repeated and competing surveys of students, which led to confusion among students and low response rates. Because multiple and competing surveys seem to be a problem at many campuses, this suggests that many campuses will be developing survey research policies in the near future.

Second, a committee of interested stakeholders is used for administrative review of surveys. By using representatives from offices that often conduct surveys on campus, interested stakeholders have some influence over the survey review process, which eases fears that the process might become overly bureaucratic and exclude them.

Third, student surveys receive the greatest focus, generally because surveys of other groups are less common. The case study schools have for the most part avoided dealing with more contentious survey issues (such as whether faculty need permission to survey other faculty).

Fourth, access to personal information from institutional databases (names, postal addresses, e-mail addresses) is monitored to help ensure compliance with the policy. Surveys generated without institutional data or assistance receive less attention, in part because they are uncommon.

From discussion with colleagues across the country, it is clear that only a few schools have instituted a survey research policy; however, many are currently struggling with similar survey issues and are considering instituting policies to address these issues. The case studies featured here can give us some guidance, but each institution has its own culture and structure that must be taken into account when designing a survey

research policy. Here are some of the questions that should be considered when developing a survey research policy.

Who Can Conduct a Survey? This seemingly simple question is actually quite complex. With any institution, there are a number of campus constituencies that may want to conduct a survey, notably students, faculty, staff, alumni, and parents. Is it consistent with academic freedom to put restrictions on surveys conducted by students and faculty? Does academic freedom extend to alumni? If so, should they be permitted (and perhaps assisted) to administer a survey of current students? Survey requests from outsiders must also be considered, as the business school example shows. With survey research methodologies becoming cheaper and more widespread, these requests will certainly mount. *Princeton Review*, for example, advertises its survey Website in student newspapers at many schools. Should these surveys be regulated by campuses?

Who Can Be Surveyed? Looking at the groups listed here, it is clear that policies vary. As discussed, students are often viewed as a group requiring special treatment. Other groups may also fit that description. At schools with strong faculty governance, the faculty senate may believe that its permission is needed before any survey of faculty can be conducted. Human resources might think similarly about staff. Restrictions on surveys of parents and alumni could be required because of political considerations, especially given the role that alumni play in fundraising.

What Types of Survey Does IRB Need to Review? The answer to this question undoubtedly depends on the answers to the previous two. Because IRB review involves issues of voluntary compliance and survey process, the answer also depends on more than simply what will be done with the data after the survey administration is complete. Note that the topic(s) of a particular survey come into play as well; surveys about illegal drug use will surely be viewed differently from surveys about the number of hours spent per week on activities such as studying and watching television. See also the discussion in Chapter Two.

Who Within the Administration Will Conduct the Review When Needed? Some schools have handled the question of review by appointing a committee of interested stakeholders, individuals from offices that conduct surveys, while others have the director of institutional research fulfill this role. Obviously this can be a difficult question to answer; parts of the administration may not wish to have their surveys fall under the purview of an individual or group. Once the reviewing role has been established, will there be an appeals process? If so, who serves this role, and how will the process work?

Will Administrative Assistance for Conducting the Survey Be Given? Given the small size of many institutional research offices, having a clear answer to the question of assistance is important, because survey administration can be burdensome. Who will receive assistance? Doing so for some faculty and not others, for example, can open an administration to

charges of favoritism. If assistance is given, under what conditions, and what services will be provided? A successful survey requires design of the survey, creation of the sample with contact information, actual administration of the survey, as well as data analyses. Any or all of these components could be offered.

Institutional Survey Policy Websites

The URLs listed here point to institutional Websites that discuss or post survey research policies for their campus. The Northwestern site has an excellent set of questions to be asked of anyone requesting a survey.

Bucknell University: http://www.bucknell.edu/Offices_Resources/Offices/Institutional_Research/Campus_Survey_Coordination.html

Massachusetts Institute of Technology: <http://web.mit.edu/surveys/coordinator.html>

Northwestern University: <http://adminplan.crown.nwu.edu/ir/sspg.htm>

University of Maryland, Baltimore County: <http://www.umbc.edu/oir/cacc/>

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