

3 *Many institutions are surveying students about sensitive topics such as alcohol and drug use, sexual behavior, and academic dishonesty. Yet these can be some of the most difficult surveys to administer successfully, given reluctance on the part of respondents both to participate and to provide truthful answers.*

Conducting Surveys on Sensitive Topics

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In an institutional research setting, surveys are often used to uncover information that will assist in decision making. Many times we investigate issues via surveys that include questions one also might ask personally of any college student, such as year in school, varsity sport participation, or hours spent studying. In many cases the responses to these types of questions are not particularly troublesome. Respondents are not particularly concerned if someone can identify their answers, nor are school officials particularly concerned about how the data will reflect on their institution.

There are instances, however, in which institutions need to gather data that are seen as sensitive. Data concerning behavioral issues, such as alcohol and other drug use and sexual behavior, can be used to help pinpoint areas where educational resources are most sorely needed. Such data can also be used to demonstrate progress (or lack thereof) in reducing the impact of such behaviors on academic and social behaviors. But because these data can describe illegal behaviors, violations of school policy, or socially undesirable traits, they are seen as addressing sensitive topics. Surveys of sensitive topics are a special case of surveying, and this chapter illustrates some of the unique considerations that researchers should be aware of when examining such topics.

Types of Sensitivities

Various kinds of sensitivities might arise with respect to survey data. Primarily, sensitivity is present when there is reason to suspect that an individual's responses to a particular question, if disclosed, might put the

respondent at risk. It is important to emphasize that this risk need not be great. It might range from a risk of feeling uncomfortable, on the one hand, to being put at risk for criminal prosecution, on the other. A student under the legal age to consume alcohol responding to a question about alcohol use is one example of a sensitive situation, because a response indicating use also admits illegal behavior and a possible violation of school policy. Determining the level of risk, the relative importance of obtaining the responses, and the subsequent level of protection necessary are some of the primary reasons behind the protocols for the protection of human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Sensitivity is also a concern when, regardless of what might or might not happen with the results, merely asking the question raises a concern with the respondent. This is most often encountered in research using questions that can have psychological implications. For instance, a woman answering a questionnaire about rape might encounter questions that recall a personal experience with a sexual assault, which might in turn trigger psychological distress.

In addition, questions that can be viewed as invading the privacy of the respondent can be seen as sensitive (Tourangeau and Smith, 1996). Questions about sexual behavior can be seen as intrusive, whether they evoke positive or negative aspects of such behaviors. For some survey respondents, identification of racial identity is a sensitive topic that some researchers view as “just a demographic” and not sensitive at all.

What should be clear from these examples is that there is a large gray area when determining what a sensitive topic is, and this gray area will vary as a function of the population as well as by individual. What is sensitive for one person is not necessarily sensitive for another.

There are also areas of sensitivity that are particular to institutional research. A survey is a public endeavor. As soon as participants see the questionnaire, it is assumed that the endeavor becomes public knowledge, and with that public knowledge can come public questions. An enterprising college newspaper reporter will want to know why the institution is surveying students about the topic: Do we have a problem with [cheating, alcohol use, diversity] here on campus? It is not just the respondent’s view of sensitive topics that must be taken into account, but also the public’s view of the asking of such questions and of what the asking implies.

Another area of sensitivity that institutional researchers should keep in mind is one that comes into play when the survey results are collected and examined. Given the public process of surveying just described, the public will know that such questions are being asked and that presumably the answers have been obtained. College officials should expect to be asked about the results and what they imply. If the institution is unprepared or unwilling to tackle the discussion that might be required after obtaining such information, those conducting the assessment might wish they had

never asked the questions in the first place. A religiously affiliated university might be challenged by a health survey that reveals sexual practices among the study body that run counter to the stated beliefs of the church and the institution. A woman's college might be apprehensive about data enumerating the same-sex experiences of its undergraduates. Depending on where the institution is situated in considering such questions, the administration, faculty, students, and alumni might or might not welcome the opportunity for dialogue offered by such information. This category of sensitivity is one that requires knowledge of local issues and will likely be different for every institution.

Why Surveys of Sensitive Topics Are Important

Given these caveats, why even conduct such surveys? This is a question that many schools will struggle with when first contemplating such an endeavor. As touched on earlier, there are multiple benefits to conducting such surveys. They gather information that can be used to inform and improve the experiences of the students, faculty, and administration at the institution. For instance, knowing which students are more at risk for health-related alcohol problems can help the administration target prevention and education programs toward those student groups (Pryor and Keeling, 2002). Conducting such assessments over time allows the institution to monitor progress in addressing such issues.

Sensitive topics are rarely encountered when a survey is only being contemplated. It is usually after years of discussion and debate on campus that such an assessment is undertaken. Until such data are obtained, the prevailing descriptions of the problem will usually come in the form of rumors or personal anecdotes. A survey provides another source of information that is more encompassing and standardized. Finally, another consideration is that merely conducting such a survey can send a message that the institution knows that the issue is of concern and is contemplating action.

Concerns About Sensitive-Topic Surveys

A major concern about sensitive-topic surveys is whether or not the responses adequately reflect reality. The underlying assumption here is that respondents will answer nonsensitive questions truthfully because there are no foreseeable negative consequences of admitting their true experiences, beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions relative to such questions. The corollary of this assumption is that when there are foreseeable negative consequences of such admissions, respondents will be motivated to respond less truthfully. Given that different people view different questions as sensitive or not, is it possible to predict response validity without first assessing individual sensitivity? Research on sensitive topics provides some insight into these matters.

If the major impetus to fabricate results is concern about being identified, then the greater the appearance that respondents will be protected from identification, the greater will be the respondents' propensity toward telling the truth. It is certain that the methods of surveying can impact the results that are obtained. One finding from both alcohol and drug research and research on sexual behavior is that respondents report a greater number of behavioral incidents when using a self-administered questionnaire than they do in an interview situation (Turner, Lessler, and Gfroerer, 1992; Tourangeau and Smith, 1996; Aquilino, 1994). Social desirability is assumed to be one mediating factor in decreasing reports of such behaviors. Another factor is the apparent lack of anonymity when actually face-to-face with an interviewer (Tourangeau and Smith, 1996). The point, however, that face-to-face interviews are less valid than self-report questionnaires because of the higher level of reporting such behaviors on the latter assumes that the higher level of reporting is accurate. While "higher is better" has been assumed when comparing the results obtained by different methodologies, no collection method can claim validity on these grounds.

More compelling validation studies on alcohol and other drug use involve comparing self-report data with subsequent (and unforeseen) drug testing. This line of research demonstrates that respondents who are asked to complete a self-report survey and then subsequently are asked for a urine or blood sample to verify the responses are answering the questionnaires truthfully (Marquis, Marquis, and Polich, 1986; Harrison, 1997). Most validity testing of self-report measures in this field, however, has been conducted on special populations such as patients in drug treatment or people in the criminal justice system, so the results might not generalize to other populations (Harrison, 1997). That most validation studies using medical testing are comparing against self-reports and not interviews does lend credence to the supposition that self-reports will be more accurate and that the higher levels of use obtained under those circumstances are indeed more likely to reflect reality.

Confidentiality and Anonymity. As mentioned earlier, one of the factors cited in reduced reporting in interview situations is that anonymity is less evident in an interview situation. Thus another major concern related to veracity of the data is how respondents perceive the likelihood of being personally identified with their answers. Making the process as protective as possible, and letting participants know this, can help assure participants that their responses will not come back to haunt them, thus increasing both potential compliance with the project and the veracity of the data.

Research on the relative effects of confidentiality versus anonymity has found mixed results (Durant, Carey, and Schroder, 2002). In some cases no differences in prevalence have been found, in other cases numbers have been higher in confidential situations, and in some cases higher percentages

have been found under anonymous conditions. In a variety of experimental conditions, Durant, Carey, and Schroder (2002) demonstrated that one of the more interesting aspects of confidential versus anonymous questionnaires is that an anonymous administration results in a slightly lower prevalence of incomplete responses. This is one compelling argument for anonymous administration, but a recent finding that requires further research.

Issues in Choosing an Instrument. There are two primary ways in which an institution may become involved in surveying on a sensitive topic. First, an individual, group, or several individuals or groups may decide that more information on the topic is necessary, and a survey is at least one of the tools they may employ. Once they have established the need, they will need an instrument. The second way an institution may become involved in surveying a sensitive topic is in a sense the opposite procedure: an individual or a group has an instrument and the institution is approached to participate in the study. The invitation may come from a researcher looking for an institution to participate in a project, from a consortium to which the institution belongs, or from a private group looking to market its services. In these cases, external political issues might impact participation either positively or negatively.

There are many issues to examine when determining how to proceed in choosing an instrument. We first consider the situation in which a group on campus has defined a need to survey and seeks how to best meet that need.

First and foremost, informational needs must be closely examined. This can often be a lengthy process because it requires dialogue between the people who know the most about the issue and researchers who can best identify how to obtain the answers. At this point three questions are on the table: (1) What do we already know about the issue from previous surveys that have asked related questions? (2) How have other institutions investigated this issue? and (3) Should we create our own instrument? Mining previous surveys or institutional data is a good first step, but not one that needs special instructions for sensitive topics.

A good second step is to investigate what other institutions have done under similar circumstances. Three pieces of information are particularly important here: how the survey was administered, what instrument was used, and whether or not the process and results were helpful.

An additional concern is whether to use an already existing instrument or create your own. One of the best reasons to consider an already available instrument is that very often comparative data are available. This is especially important for surveys about sensitive topics because when the results come in people will want a benchmark to help them interpret the results as being better or worse than the results obtained at other institutions. If previous research in the field has established a particular benchmark (such as for binge drinking in alcohol consumption), then an institution should

anticipate being asked by various constituents to address this benchmark with any instrument chosen. As one might expect, using sensitive data from other institutions usually requires some caveats, such as not being able to see data in other than an aggregate form and perhaps not being able to openly identify the institutions that are included in the aggregate figures. Nationally available surveys usually have these details spelled out and require a signed statement of willingness to conform to their policies (this protects the institution seeking to use the survey as well). If comparative data are especially important, verify that they will actually be available in the necessary format when needed.

A nationally available instrument that examines sensitive topics will likely have been through several test phases and have reliability and validity data, which might be cumbersome to collect when designing an instrument. Sensitive topics can also have particular nuances that might not be detected until after careful testing which is another reason to investigate available instruments. (Table 3.1 lists several large-scale survey instruments developed to examine sensitive topics that are available for use by institutions of higher education.)

Certainly the instrument that will fit an institution best is one that is carefully crafted for the institution's particular needs. Local jargon can be utilized, making the project seem more knowledgeable (and perhaps then more credible) to the respondents than a formula survey would be. If a campus does not have fraternities or sororities, for instance, then using a pre-existing instrument that contains questions about fraternity drinking might be seen by some potential respondents as illustrating a lack of understanding of the campus's issues.

Creating a questionnaire can be a lengthy and painstaking process, however. As many researchers who have been in this position know, this requires a good deal of patience and education among all participants if the process is to create a satisfactory product. Creating a questionnaire can help create buy-in for the responders (see next section), but because data comparability is lessened, there is less of a context in which to interpret the results.

Stakeholder Buy-in

Regardless of which instrument is used, great care must be given to obtain stakeholder buy-in up front. If an instrument is chosen without careful consideration of what the responses would mean, the survey might be an exercise in futility. Surveys on sensitive topics produce sensitive findings. The institution must be prepared to deal with the findings in some fashion. Having buy-in from the stakeholders as to the importance of the questions before they are asked and answered can lessen the possibility that the findings will be dismissed. Making sure that those who will be affected by the results agree on the importance of asking the questions will increase

Table 3.1. Resources for Surveying Students on Sensitive Topics

| <i>Instrument</i> | <i>Source</i> | <i>Topics</i> | <i>URL</i> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Academic Integrity Survey | Center for Academic Integrity | Academic integrity/cheating | http://www.academicintegrity.org/assessGuide.asp |
| TheHealthSurvey | Outside the Classroom | Alcohol, tobacco, drugs Sex Eating Suicide Violence and safety Use of health education and counseling | http://www.outsidetheclassroom.com/products/thehealthsurvey.asp |
| National College Health Assessment | American College Health Association | Alcohol, tobacco, drugs Sex Eating Suicide Violence and safety Vaccinations | http://www.acha.org/projects_programs/assessment.cfm |
| Core Alcohol and Drug Survey | Core Institute | Alcohol and drugs | http://www.siu.edu/coreinst |

the likelihood of the results being accepted rather than rejected. Sensitive findings are usually uncomfortable for someone. Some people, when confronted with an uncomfortable finding, will attempt to somehow discredit the assessment. One way to discredit the finding is to attack the question as being either flawed or irrelevant. Another way that people can react to findings they perceive as threatening or disturbing is to attack the methodology used in conducting the study. If one has obtained buy-in up front from stakeholders, the chances of countering this argument are increased.

Methodological Concerns

As stated earlier, the methodology used in conducting the survey is likely to be attacked by those who are looking for a way to discredit the results. This is one very good reason for making sure that the methodology is sound. More important is that respondents should be protected from sensitive results being in any way revealed on an individual basis.

Protection of Human Subjects. Although institutions differ in both policy and practice as to whether or not institutional research projects are required to undergo institutional review board approval, surveys of sensitive topics should always go through this process. This offers protection for everyone: the researcher, the institution, and the participants.

Although institutional review boards do not all have the same rules for reviewing research on human subjects, there are some general guidelines that can streamline the process. In recent years compliance with federal regulations has come under increased scrutiny (Gunsalus, 2002), and some institutions have required that all those who submit proposals for review must also have completed a course on the protection of human subjects. Preparing and submitting the materials, as well as waiting for the decision of the review board, can be time-consuming, and this time must be factored into the research schedule. If there are revisions to be made that require a resubmission, this will take further time to accomplish. Although submitting the research plan to a review board is an added burden on the institutional research office, many institutions require all research to be submitted to the review board. Doing so will both comply with institutional regulations and help ensure that the study's methodology protects all the relevant parties in the best way possible.

There are traditionally three levels of human subject review: exempt, expedited, and full review. One error that can be made is for a research office to think that it can determine at which level a particular project belongs. It cannot. The review board has the mandate to make that determination, and one must submit to the board the proper materials for review before it can be determined what level is appropriate for a project. In general a project will qualify as exempt from further review if anonymity is given to the respondents and if the material being examined is not sensitive. If a project is not anonymous—that is, if the data can be linked somehow

to the participants—then the project will not likely be considered exempt but may be considered expedited. Usually surveys of sensitive topics will also be considered expedited. Most survey projects do not make it to the next level, full review, which is more often used for medical research that contains a certain level of psychological or physical risk.

Under expedited review, the reviewers will likely be looking for several key criteria to be met. First, if the project is not anonymous, confidentiality should be assured. In many cases, in order to increase response rates, researchers will want to know if a specific individual returned a survey or if he or she needs to be sent a follow-up reminder. This can be difficult to accomplish under conditions of anonymity, so many researchers choose to promise confidentiality instead. Most review boards will want to see a layer of protection for the respondents where the data are kept, such as not having any individually identifiable data present in the response database. In this case, having two databases assists in keeping confidentiality while also allowing respondent status to be tracked: one database contains the identifying factor (name, student identification number, and so on) and a randomly generated identification number, while the database with the survey responses contains only the randomly generated identification number for linkage to the identifying information.

Second, review boards might be concerned if a respondent pool contains people under the age of eighteen and might require special consideration for that group, such as active parental consent.

Third, the review board will want to see all information that is being sent to potential respondents, including any cover letters and the survey instrument itself. Here again review boards differ with respect to the emphases that are placed on certain issues, but in general they will want to see that the project is accurately described to the participant (including who is conducting the research), that anonymity or confidentiality (whichever is appropriate) is explained, that participants are told they have a right to refuse to participate, and that refusal to participate will have no negative repercussions.

Confidentiality and Anonymity. One additional aspect, discussed briefly already, is relevant to sensitive surveys. Those who are asked to participate in the survey will likely not know the difference between confidentiality and anonymity or confuse one with the other. Briefly explaining what is being promised will both educate respondents sufficiently for purposes of human subjects review and anticipate potential questions. Oftentimes simply explaining that the survey is confidential (but not how confidentiality differs from anonymity) will elicit questions later in the survey process. For example, respondents who confuse confidentiality with anonymity may question how anyone knew they had not responded to the first questionnaire or how a prize was awarded for participating. Addressing this issue up front may reduce the number of questions asked as well as increase the response rate.

Respondents are concerned with anonymity and confidentiality in their responses to questions about sensitive topics when they are concerned about the possibility of their individual answers being revealed. Making the process as protective as possible and letting participants know this can help assure them that their responses will not come back to haunt them, and thus increase potential compliance with the project as well as veracity of the data.

Another way to increase the credibility of project safeguards is to provide externally validated assurances concerning the process. One easy way to do this is to provide evidence of permission from the institutional human subjects review board. Another way is to include a letter from an institutional authority figure assuring that the institution will not attempt to identify individuals based on survey data. For instance, a survey on Academic Integrity might include a letter from the dean of students promising that no disciplinary action will occur as a result of survey findings. Finally, there are some federal agencies that provide such verifications. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism will provide a “certificate of confidentiality” to research projects that meet their criteria (National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002). This certificate protects the institution from being legally obligated to provide information obtained from individuals in the course of a research project.

Timing of Your Survey. If a questionnaire asks about sensitive behaviors in order to determine their prevalence over a certain period, it is important to know whether or not the specified period will capture customary behavior or irregular behavior. If an institution is interested in the average amount of alcohol consumed by students, the school calendar should be considered when administering the survey. Administering the survey on the day after spring break ends will gather data about spring break, not about regular college-based behavior. The same caveat applies to large party weekends, when students tend to drink more than average. Not only will conducting a survey at this time produce data that might be misinterpreted, but students will connect the timing with the request and question the veracity of any claims made via the results.

Reporting Issues. Asking questions about sensitive issues is one thing; reporting on them is another. To avoid misunderstandings, specifics about reporting should be considered before gathering the data. In some cases, restrictions concerning reporting might need to be determined before embarking on the project. An institution might agree to participate in a study only if results are to be communicated only to senior officers, for instance. It is usually helpful to have discussions about the findings with stakeholders before any documents are written about the results. This is helpful both from the standpoint of gaining additional perspectives on the issues to be elaborated upon in a report and from the standpoint of needing to give the stakeholders time to make any necessary institutional preparations to address the findings publicly. It is also helpful to

coordinate announcements of survey findings with news or public affairs personnel. Sensitive topics can be of great interest to the media, and it helps to have professional media handlers on one's side.

Concluding Remarks

Special circumstances exist when surveys of sensitive topics are considered. While every institutional research project should be carried out with deliberation, surveys of sensitive topics require that even greater care be taken. Such research projects can be of great benefit to an institution, both in dispelling myths where they exist and in helping to determine areas of greatest need. While they are more difficult to manage, surveys of sensitive topics have potential for great payoff in institutional discovery and change.

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