



University
of Vermont

Office of Institutional Research
and Assessment

SURVEY FRAMEWORK

A Guide to Conducting Surveys at UVM

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Purpose

This document was prepared by the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment in collaboration with the Assessment Council in response to our colleagues' request for comprehensive and current guidelines about administering surveys at the University of Vermont.

Please keep in mind that each course, Program, Department, College, and Unit is unique and may require its own special approach to conducting surveys. For specific assistance, Faculty and Staff should reach out to the [Office of Institutional Research & Assessment](#) (OIRA) for assistance.

We hope that you find this document informative in helping you administer your own surveys in addition to understanding what data is available from existing campus-wide surveys and how to request and utilize it.

[Appendix A](#) of this document includes a Survey Planning and Governance Guide, please utilize this document and appendix when considering and planning for a survey.

Survey Basics

Defining Key Terms

Anonymity: Anonymity indicates that the administrator of the survey cannot tie responses to individuals. Any relevant demographic information must be self-reported within the survey. Anonymous surveys tend to increase honesty in responses while decreasing the usability of data.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality indicates that the administrator of the survey can tie responses to individuals but guarantees that information will not be shared with any interested parties. Confidentiality increases the usability of the data at the potential cost of honesty in responses.

When to Use Surveys

Surveys are often considered a default option because they are considered “easy.” However, there is a lot that goes into survey design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Gateway Technical College has created a decision tree (see Appendix B) that helps determine, “should it even be a survey?” The end of the decision tree concludes whether a survey should be tabled/delayed, if existing data should be used, or if you should work with OIRA to develop and administer a survey. The decision tree is intended to help you start thinking about the survey process. Please review the Survey Planning and Governance Guide ([Appendix A](#)) and contact



[OIRA](#) if you have questions about whether you should initiate a new survey or if the data you need can be obtained through an alternate channel.

Internally versus Externally Developed Surveys

Internally Developed: These surveys are developed by the university, program, department, unit, college, etc. It is often designed to measure something specific to the unit developing the survey and are often designed, administered, and analyzed by OIRA, the unit that initiated the survey, or a collaboration between the two. Creating a survey internally allows the initiator to have more control over what questions are included, who receives the survey, how they receive it, and the raw data generated from the survey.

Externally Developed: These surveys are developed by an external organization or university. Examples at UVM include the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). External surveys have a pre-set series of questions and often limit question customization. Depending on the external organization, they may also manage distribution and analysis of the survey data. Externally developed surveys have the advantage of being developed by recognized experts in the field the survey is being developed for, and the survey tool has been proven valid and reliable. However, externally developed surveys are often expensive and may limit access to the raw data generated from the survey.

Intended Use of Data

How you plan on using the data generated from the survey will drive many of the decisions made during the development process (ex: anonymous vs. confidential, internally vs. externally developed, etc.). The two main categories of how survey data is used are:

Benchmarking: Benchmarking involves the comparison of your results to the results of a peer group to determine how you are performing relative to the group. Benchmarking provides greater context to survey results where seemingly concerning results could prove positive if better than the comparative group and vice versa. Benchmarking requires the use of an externally developed survey. The survey must be chosen carefully to ensure an appropriate comparison group is available.

Institutional Improvement: Most survey administrators seek to use the generated data for improvement purposes. It is possible, but often challenging, to choose a survey that can satisfy both benchmarking and institutional improvement purposes. An internally developed survey is typically more useful for institutional improvement purposes as they offer greater control over the development of the survey along with full access to the raw data generated from it.



Writing Effective Survey Questions

Writing effective survey questions stems from the purpose of the survey and the intended use of the data. There are four common survey question types:

Likert Scales: Commonly used for agreement or satisfaction-type responses. For example, asking “Overall, how satisfied are you with [insert program]?” and including response options ranging from very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neither dissatisfied or satisfied, satisfied, and very satisfied. It is important to ensure that response options are internally consistent and should be listed from negative to positive.

Multiple Choice: Commonly include single or multiple select options. Multiple choice/select questions include providing a list of responses for respondents to choose from or select multiple of.

Open-ended: Commonly used to collect qualitative data that can provide more rich and descriptive information than quantitative data. However, open-ended questions are the most time consuming and onerous to analyze results from so their use should be minimized to instances where information can’t be obtained from my other question type.

Ranking: Commonly used to ask respondents to prioritize items in a list.

In addition to selecting the best question type, here are some guidelines for writing effective survey questions:

Use clear and concise wording: Be specific and concrete by avoiding vague terms (e.g., regularly vs. at least once a week). It is also important to avoid jargon or acronyms that may be unfamiliar to respondents. When using acronyms, make sure to fully write out the term and put the acronym in parentheses after when the term is first encountered (e.g., National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE)).

Avoid double-barreled questions: Do not combine multiple ideas into one question. If a question evaluates more than one idea, the respondent may not know how to respond properly. For example, do not ask “how satisfied are you with your instructor and the course materials?” In cases such as this, it’s important to separate those out as separate questions.

Be consistent with language structure: It is important to stay consistent with language structure for survey questions and answer options. For example, when writing Likert scale questions, use the same agreement/satisfaction scale throughout the survey.



Avoid leading or biased language: Keep questions neutral and avoid emotionally charged or persuasive language. For example, do not ask, “How much did you enjoy this fun event.?” Rather, ask, “How satisfied were you with the event?”

Collection of Demographic Information

There are two paths that can be utilized when collecting demographic data. The first is to require survey respondents to authenticate using their UVM credentials before they take the survey. Qualtrics allows the ability to automatically collect identifying information including NetIDs. This identifying information can then be used to connect the survey data to other existing data sets (e.g., demographic information from Banner). Please request a meeting with [OIRA](#) to set up this feature in your survey. Another way to collect demographic data is to ask the questions within the survey. OIRA is happy to partner with you should you choose to develop your own demographic survey items. Some general good practices when writing demographic questions, include: avoid othering by using “Another please describe,” provide an open textbox for students to describe, and include a select all that apply option.

Survey Organization:

After survey questions have been established, take some time to consider how the questions are organized. The order of the survey can affect response rates and quality. Start with easier or general questions to capture respondents’ interest. It is also helpful to organize similar items together by theme to help with survey flow and data analysis. Be mindful of the number of open-ended questions that are included. Too many open-ended questions can affect the completion rate of the survey in addition to making the analysis more challenging. After the survey is designed and organized, ask a colleague or OIRA to review the survey. A second set of eyes can identify typos, check for flow, and check for any unanticipated problems.

Increasing Response Rates

While the goal is not to collect the largest number of responses, it is important to collect enough data to accurately apply the findings to a population. Below are strategies for increasing response rates:

Keep the survey short: Be sure to limit the number of questions to those essential for the objective. Aim for 5-10 minutes or less to complete the survey.

Limit free response questions: Respondents generally are more willing to choose pre-formatted options in multiple choice or multiple select questions than they are to type longer free response answers, especially if they are taking the survey on their phones. Limiting free response questions helps keep the survey short and has the added benefit of making the data easier to analyze after the survey closes.



Use more than one distribution strategy: Surveys can be distributed via digital or physical flyer with a QR code and/or a link, personalized invitations, after events, before or after class, etc. Distributing the survey via social media channels is often effective in increasing response rates. Depending on the survey audience, it may be appropriate to utilize more than one method.

Choose the right timing: Timing is critical for a couple of reasons. First, you do not want your survey to overlap with another survey that is targeted towards a similar audience. Second, you do not want to wait too long to survey if you are evaluating a program, event or course. Putting too much time between the end of a program and the evaluation may result in a lower response rate due to respondents having moved on from the program.

Offer an incentive: If budget allows, even a small incentive can increase participation (e.g., gift cards, raffle entry, etc.). Be sure to be clear and transparent about how winners are selected and when.

Close the feedback loop: Respondents want to know that their responses are being put into action. Do not collect data for the sake of having data, collect with the purpose to improve a program, event, or course. If possible, include examples of how previous responses have been used to implement change.

Avoid making questions mandatory whenever possible: The number of mandatory questions should be minimized. Making a question mandatory may alter responses if the respondent isn't interested in answering that question. For non-free response questions, always make sure to include a response where the respondent can indicate that the question isn't applicable to them and/or they have no opinion to help ensure the validity of their response.

Avoid asking questions you can get the answer to through alternative means: Doing so allows you to focus the survey on the questions you truly need answered thereby shortening the survey, improving the survey experience, and potentially improving response rates. For example, having students authenticate before taking a survey allows you to capture who they are so you can avoid asking demographic questions you already know the answer to.

Survey Platform

All UVM students and employees have access to [Qualtrics](#), a web-based survey tool that allows users to create, distribute, and analyze survey results. As a dedicated survey platform, Qualtrics offers more powerful options in creating and administering surveys than other potential platforms including Microsoft Forms. As UVM's official survey platform, significant support exists to assist in the use of Qualtrics. OIRA can provide help with creating and administering



surveys in Qualtrics; to express interest in receiving support, complete [OIRA's request form](#) and choose "Data collection" when asked, "What is the nature of this request?" Additionally, [UVM's Knowledge Base](#) offers support as well. An added benefit of using Qualtrics is that it includes UVM branding built into the survey design. It is OIRA's strong recommendation to use Qualtrics for creating and administering surveys.

Data Governance

UVM values the privacy of and ethical use of data. To support these goals, the Data Governance Council was formed to modernize and improve the university's data culture by improving campus-wide data storage and usage practices. It is expected that all survey administrators understand whether they are collecting [non-public protected data](#) (NPPD) as part of their survey. If NPPD is being collected, survey administrators should complete OIRA's [Data Governance form](#) where they can learn about and agree to the expectations for the safeguarding, retention, and destruction of NPPD.

All surveys should have a data governance statement on their introduction page that informs participants whether their responses are confidential, anonymous, or neither, along with how their responses will be used (see [Appendix C](#) for sample statements). Please reach out to [OIRA](#) if you need assistance in writing this statement.

Existing Campus-wide Surveys

To help inform the campus community of already existing campus-wide surveys and the data generated from each, OIRA maintains a [record](#) of all campus-wide surveys that details the name, frequency of administration, and data generated from these surveys. Data from selected surveys (including the [Campus Climate Survey](#) and the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#)) is available via dashboards. The Career Outcomes survey was recently transitioned to Handshake® and dashboards will be available soon. Dashboards for more surveys are currently under development and will be available soon. Data from surveys that currently don't have a dashboard are available upon request; send us an [email](#) or [submit a request](#) to discover what is available.

To reduce survey fatigue, it is recommended that you don't administer your survey at the same time as a campus-wide survey if they target the same population. Please use the timeline on the spreadsheet to be intentional about when you administer your survey.

Collaborating with OIRA

As detailed above, OIRA is available to help you create & administer surveys, use Qualtrics, analyze data generated from surveys, and help you access data from campus-wide surveys. Please [email us](#) or [submit a request](#) to discover how we can help.



Available Resources

The [OIRA website](#) is a hub for UVM data and assessment resources. Resources highlighted in this document include:

- [Qualtrics Help from UVM Knowledge Base](#)
- [OIRA Request Form](#)
- [OIRA Data Governance Form](#)

Additionally, these external may be useful in helping you develop and administer your survey:

- [Survey Management Guide from the Association for Institutional Research Forum](#)



Appendix A: Survey Planning and Governance Guide

The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment is committed to making surveys meaningful, efficient, and coordinated. Please review the following questions before moving forward with your survey. Once you have considered these questions, please schedule a meeting with a member of our team via our [request form](#) to discuss your responses and develop a plan. Partnering early with OIRA will promote collaboration, avoid duplication, and strengthen our surveys campuswide.

1. Purpose & Alignment

- What is the primary goal of this survey? Who are your intended audiences for these survey results?
- How does it connect to institutional priorities, accreditation, or strategic goals?
- Could the information already exist in existing institutional surveys, dashboards, or administrative records?

2. Collaboration & Coordination

- Has another unit already collected similar information?
- Could this survey be combined or adapted with other efforts to reduce duplication?
- Have you consulted the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment about timing and fit within the campus survey calendar?

3. Design & Metrics

- Are you using shared measures/items so results can be compared across campus?
- Will the results connect to or build on existing campus survey data?

4. Impact on Respondents

- Who is your target population?
- Have they recently been surveyed by other units?
- How can you minimize survey fatigue and reduce overlap?
- Is a survey the best method, or would focus groups, interviews, or existing data work better?

5. Resources & Follow-Through

- Do you have staff, funding, and expertise to design, administer, and analyze the survey effectively?
- How will you share results back with participants and stakeholders?
- How will findings be used for decision-making, improvement, or accountability?

6. Data & Confidentiality

- Will the survey data be collected anonymously, de-identified, or identifiable?
- If identifiable, how will the data be securely stored, and how will identifiers be used?



- If identifiable, is there a clear plan (and approval, if required) for linking the data to student or employee records?

7. Data Governance & Stewardship

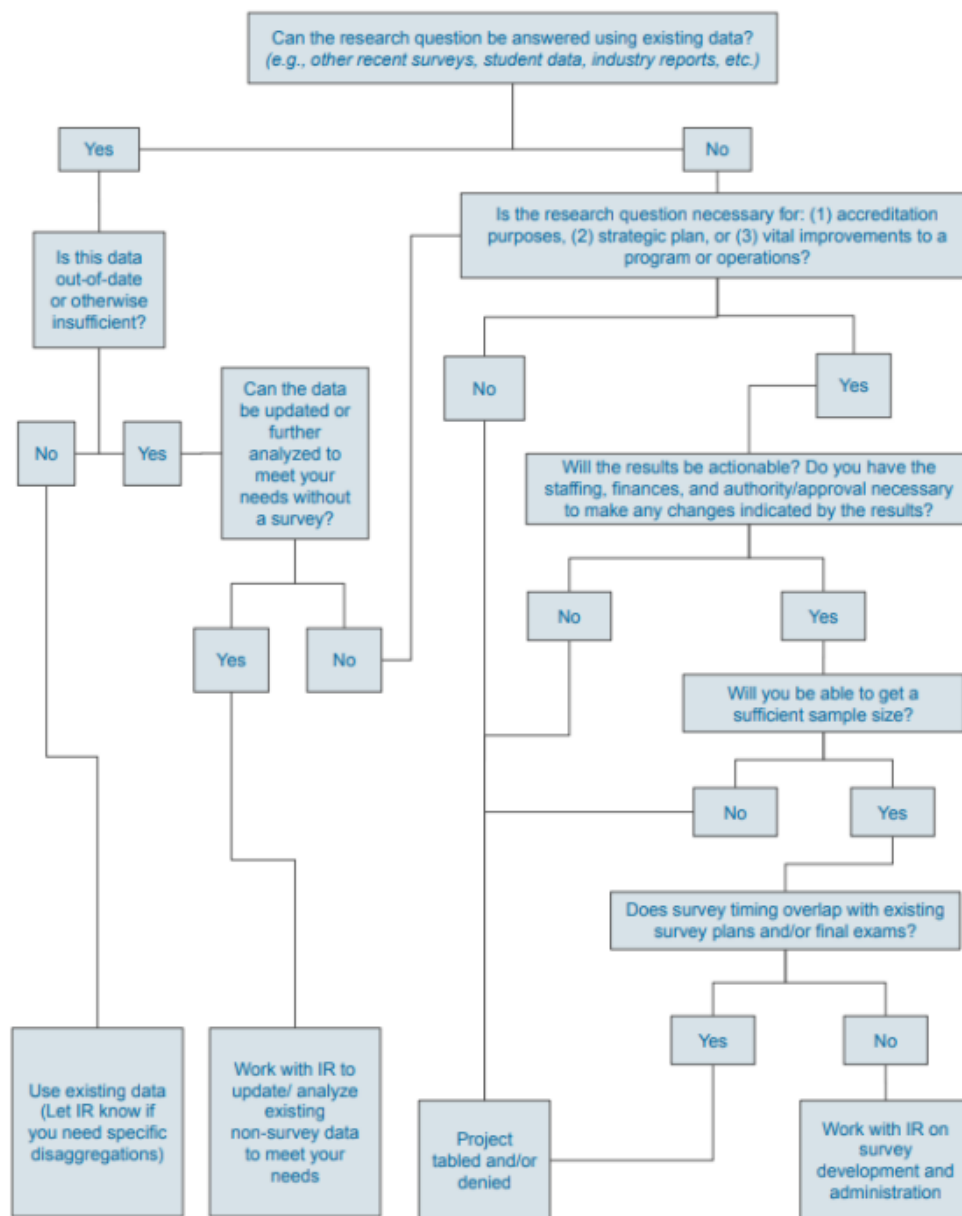
- Who is the data steward responsible for this survey and its outputs?
- How will the data be stored, secured, and retained, in compliance with university policies?
- Who will have access to the raw data, and how will access be managed?
- How will you ensure compliance with FERPA, IRB, or other regulatory/ethical requirements?
- What is the plan for documenting metadata (definitions, methods, coding) so results can be interpreted consistently over time?
- Does this survey align with existing data governance principles?



Appendix B: Gateway Technical College Survey Decision Tree



"Is It a Survey?" Decision Tree



Appendix C: Sample Data Governance Statements

Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue at any time. All questions are optional. There is no significant risk of participation as no personal information will be requested, and individual responses will not be shared.

By completing this survey, you consent to having this information shared with campus partners, who may reach out to you so they can help improve your UVM experience.

Your responses are confidential and will only be used and reported in aggregate form by the INSERT UNIT NAME.

Each response will be anonymous and kept strictly confidential. The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) will be responsible for all data collected and will share analysis and reports only at the aggregate level.



Appendix D: Campus-wide Survey Information

Survey	Frequency	Semester	Recent Administrations	Population	Administered By	Campus Partner(s)
Athletics Survey	Annually	Spring	2024	Student athletes	Athletics	OIRA
Campus Climate Survey	3 years	Spring	2019 2022 2025	Entire Campus	OIRA	DOIE
Career Outcomes	Annually	Spring to Fall	Since 2015	Graduates (both UG and Grad)	Career Center	OIRA
Dining	Annually	Fall & Spring	Unknown	Entire Campus	UVM Dining	N/A
DOSA Parent Survey	Annually	Spring (Feb-April)	Since 2023	Parents (can be parents of any student)	DOSA	N/A
End of Orientation Survey	Annually	Fall	2024	FTFY and Transfer Students who attend orientation. Questions similar to the First Six Weeks Survey	Orientation	OIRA
Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)	3 years	Spring	2025	Undergraduate Teaching Faculty	NSSE	VPAASS
First Six-Weeks	Annually	Fall	Since 2016	First-year students Transfer Students(?)	OIRA	First Six-Weeks Committee



Survey	Frequency	Semester	Recent Administrations	Population	Administered By	Campus Partner(s)
Living Expense Survey	Every 2 Years	Fall	2025	Graduate Students	SFS	OIRA
Monthly Measures	Monthly	Fall & Spring	Annually	Random Sample of Undergraduate Students	OIRA	CHWB
National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)	3 years	Spring	2017 2020 2023 2024 2026	First-Year & Senior Undergraduate Students	NSSE	VPAASS
Off-Campus Survey	Annually	Spring (February)	2025	Students who live off-campus	OSCR	Res Life, DOSA
Orientation Parent Survey	Annually	Fall (August)	2024	Parents of new students	Orientation	VPAASS
Orientation Sessions Survey	Annually	Fall	2024	Students who attend New Student Orientation	Orientation	OIRA
Pre-Enrollment Survey	Annually	Fall	2024	First-Year Students Transfer Students	Orientation	VPAASS, OIRA
Sky Factor Benchmarking Survey	Annually	Fall (November)	2024	Students who live in UVM Housing	Res Life	N/A

