

Policy Governing Electronic Surveys and Questionnaires
Directed to Students, Faculty Members, or Staff of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Background

The development over the past decade of free, easy-to-use tools for developing and launching web surveys has been a great boon to faculty and students seeking cost-effective ways to obtain responses to research surveys and to administrators who want feedback on the effectiveness of campus services and initiatives. Because the cost of administering a survey no longer includes printing, mailing, and data entry expenses, electronic surveys can now reach thousands of subjects with almost zero incremental cost per subject. As a result, the number of these surveys has exploded and there is a natural desire for individuals or groups planning a survey to broadcast it to the maximum number of people possible, in order to increase statistical power and/or the scope of the results, instead of carefully selecting a more focused sample.

When electronic surveys were new, and few in number, response rates were fairly high due in part to the novelty of the medium. However, response rates in recent years have dropped significantly, certainly in part as a result of “survey fatigue”; there are so many surveys that many faculty members, staff, and students are just not responding any more. Hence the effectiveness of all surveys, even very important ones, is diminished. As an example, since 2004, the campus has participated every two years in the National Survey of Student Engagement, inviting a sample of freshmen and seniors to answer important questions about how engaged they are in learning. The response rate in 2004 was 35%; in 2012, the response rate was down to 17%, and of the 17%, only about three-quarters of the respondents actually completed the full survey. Such response rates make it very difficult to derive meaningful results from any survey and threaten the ability of all members of our community to obtain important results from survey research.

Some kind of screening or review of these surveys is clearly needed. Yet there currently is no policy to guide the campus with respect to requests for access to faculty, students, and staff via electronic means for the purposes of surveys. The following policy was developed in order to place some reasonable boundaries on electronic surveys of our employees, and to ensure that survey research is conducted in a way that respects the privacy and confidentiality of respondents. By establishing a formal, representative review committee and process, the intention is to make such screening and review more impartial, consistent, and transparent.

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1. Purpose

Electronic surveys are cost-effective tools for conducting research and for obtaining feedback to improve campus services or to inform campus administrators.

Unfortunately, when the same populations are surveyed repeatedly, response rates decline and the accuracy of survey results becomes questionable. This policy is intended to balance the need of members of the campus community for survey-based research and for feedback with the growing demands that electronic surveys make on the valuable time of students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, limits on the numbers of surveys distributed to the same individuals should improve the response rates and effectiveness of each survey. Finally, this policy contains provisions designed to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all unsolicited web-based or e-mail surveys and questionnaires sent to a group of students, faculty, or staff by a member of the university community as part of his or her administrative duties, as part of a research project, or as part of a thesis or class assignment. It also applies to surveys of campus students, faculty, and staff conducted by external groups or person; however, such external surveys may be subject to additional requirements and conditions. It does not restrict in any way:

- Surveys sent by voluntary associations to their own members; for example, a registered student organization may freely poll its own members or a union may survey its own members;
- Surveys sent out to all members of a voluntary e-mail list
- Electronic collection of information required for employment or matriculation.
- Electronic communication between a faculty member and his or her students

In addition, as spelled out below, colleges and other campus units can develop their own policies on surveys for internal purposes. The main focus of concern for this policy is unsolicited requests for access to campus-wide populations for large-scale surveys. In other cases, the focus of the campus-level review committee (4.a) would simply be to ensure that other elements of this policy (IRB oversight for example, and appropriate privacy protections) were being followed.

3. Oversight provided by the campus Institutional Review Board (IRB)

This policy does not change the oversight required by the IRB. While some surveys do not constitute human subjects research, any that do must be either reviewed by the IRB or explicitly exempted by IRB staff from a full review. See <http://www.irb.illinois.edu> for the process of obtaining IRB approval or exemption for a survey and for information on mandated training for all human subjects researchers.

4. Administration of this policy

- a. Oversight: An Electronic Survey Administration Committee, reporting to the Chancellor, will be appointed to administer this policy. The Director of the Division of Management Information will chair the committee, and one additional member will be appointed annually each by the Chancellor, the Provost, the Dean of Students, the Dean of the Graduate College, the IRB Office, the Urbana-Champaign Senate, the Illinois Student Senate, and the Council of Deans. The committee should meet at least annually to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy and, if needed, recommend revisions.
- b. Survey approval: The Dean of Students shall designate a person to be responsible for reviewing and approving any campus-wide surveys that target student groups. The Associate Provost for Human Resources is responsible for reviewing and approving any surveys that target employees campus-wide. The process for obtaining approval for any campus-wide survey shall be posted on the Management Information web site: <http://www.dmi.illinois.edu>. Deans and other executive officers are responsible for creating a process for approving unit-wide surveys within their units.
- c. Monitoring: The Division of Management Information shall publish a record of approved campus-wide surveys which should include the purpose of the survey, the population or sample surveyed, the survey dates, and the approving officer. Any exceptions made to this policy should be noted. Colleges are encouraged to maintain similar records or to submit their survey information for inclusion on the campus-wide survey record maintained by Management Information to permit monitoring of the numbers of surveys that are underway at any point in time.
- d. Exceptions: Where noted, exceptions to provisions in the policy may be granted by a campus, college, or unit administrative officer whose scope of responsibility includes the full group being surveyed. For example, a dean may approve a full-population survey of any groups within that dean's college or the Associate Provost for Human Resources may approve surveys of various employee groups.

5. Sampling vs. full population surveys

Rarely does a survey require distribution to a full population to obtain valid results. Examples of a "full population" include all students, all juniors, all faculty members, all academic professionals in one college, and all female staff employees. Unless an exception is granted by a person authorized to approve surveys as described in Section 4, surveys may not be distributed to a full population. Instead, surveys should be distributed to a random sample of the desired population. The Division of Management Information can assist in creating random samples for survey projects, and the Survey Research Lab can advise about appropriate sample sizes and sampling techniques (fees may apply). The annual Senior Survey and the Instructor-Course Evaluation System surveys conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence are examples of full-population surveys that are approved.

6. Restrictions on sample selection

- a. Students who have notified the Registrar that they wish to suppress all directory information under the provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) should never be included in a sample that is provided to a surveyor.
- b. By law, no person under the age of 18 may be surveyed without permission of a parent or guardian. All survey sample selections, including approved full-population surveys, should exclude such persons. If it is not possible to exclude them from the invitation (e.g. when using a campus Mass Mail facility), the survey consent form must include a statement requiring the respondent to be at least 18 years of age.

7. Confidentiality issues

- a. Samples based on private information
When a survey sample is drawn based on non-directory information for students (see FERPA policy at <http://www.registrar.illinois.edu/staff/ferpa>) or sensitive or confidential information (for faculty and staff), the identities of the persons sampled may not be provided to the surveyor. Examples of private information include samples based on race/ethnicity, gender, age, and grade point average.
- b. Ensuring the confidentiality of respondents
Surveyors must obtain IRB approval for procedures to ensure the confidentiality of respondents. When an IRB-approved informed consent agreement promises that responses will be confidential, the surveyor must aggregate responses to ensure that no individual responses are identifiable. In addition, the surveyor must ensure that all electronic records are secured adequately and access is limited to a small number of persons who understand the confidentiality requirements.

Where respondent identity is collected, e.g. by requiring the respondent to enter a unique code or using an authentication method such as network id and password, the identities of the respondents should be maintained separately from the responses. Unless the approved research design requires on-going contact with the respondents, respondent identity information should be destroyed after the survey is completed.

Free-form comments must be screened and parts of any comments that identify a respondent or other person must be redacted before publication.

Any promise of confidentiality may be superseded by a legal duty to take action when a survey response reveals a potentially dangerous situation or illegal activity or is the subject of a legal process. Surveyors should consult University Counsel in such situations.

- c. Incentives: Incentives such as prize drawings or giveaways can improve survey response rates but may compromise the confidentiality of the responses. Surveys should follow procedures for incentives approved by the IRB Office such as redirecting users to a second web site to register for or receive the incentive.
- d. Anonymity

An anonymous survey would require that the surveyor have no way to link the respondent with his/her responses. The security logs maintained by most modern computers make it almost impossible to guarantee anonymity. Unless extraordinary measures are taken to eliminate electronic traces, surveyors should not promise anonymity.

8. Other use of samples or lists

Lists of e-mails or other contact information provided to surveyors may be used only for the one approved survey. Any other use is strictly forbidden. E-mail lists should be destroyed as soon as the survey is complete.

9. Timing of surveys

Surveys of students (other than course evaluations) are not permitted during the week before final examinations or the week of final examinations.

10. Use of outside contractors or services to collect survey responses

a. Participation in surveys managed by other organizations

With IRB approval and the approval of an administrator as described in Section 4, a unit may collaborate with an external agency to administer a survey to individual Illinois students, faculty members, and staff. A contract ensuring that the external agency will adhere to the provisions of this policy should be drawn up with the advice of University Counsel and signed by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois and the external agency. No confidential information may be provided to the external agency.

b. Use of external web survey services

Campus faculty, staff, and students should exercise caution when considering the use of an off-campus web site to design and administer a survey. Surveyors are encouraged to seek the advice of the University Office of Business and Financial Affairs Purchasing Division, CITES, and University Counsel before using such a site for any University-sponsored survey. The managers of the survey site must guarantee that the responses to survey questions will not be used for any other purpose, e.g. data mining or marketing. Survey respondents should not be subjected to inappropriate or annoying ads. Lists of University e-mail addresses may not be provided to these services unless there is a signed contract with the Board of Trustees ensuring that the e-mail addresses will not be used for any other purpose. No confidential information held by the university may be given to these services under any circumstances.

11. Reminders to non-respondents

After the initial invitation, only one reminder should be distributed to the survey sample. Any additional reminders are rare exceptions, which must be approved by the IRB and an administrator as described in Section 4.

12. Opt-out list

The Division of Management Information shall maintain a list of e-mail addresses of persons who do not wish to receive any campus-wide surveys and shall not include them in any campus-wide survey samples created by the Division. This list may be shared with other persons who create lists for surveys. However, it is not possible to exclude such persons from surveys which are sent to entire populations using the campus Massmail facility.

13. Contact information

Questions about this policy should be directed to the Division of Management Information (dmi@illinois.edu).

Date issued: ___/___/___

Approved by: Office of the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs