

## **Guidelines for administering surveys and collecting data**

### **Draft**

This document has been compiled to provide the MIT community with basic guidelines for collecting data and administering surveys. These guidelines are not applicable to projects that collect data from individuals as part of the three major systems of record (HR SAP, Alumni database and MITSI S). They are applicable to data collected for inclusion in local databases which are not the MIT systems of record.

#### **I. Who needs to Know**

When conducting a survey there are a number of individuals/Offices that should know basic information about the survey: who is being surveyed, what are they being asked about, when is the survey being administered and what method is being used to administer the survey.

##### **A. Senior Officers**

Whenever a survey is administered at MIT is very important to consult with the Senior Officer / Senior Office about the survey population. For example, the Dean for Undergraduate Education and the Dean for Student life must be consulted prior to surveying undergraduates, the Dean of Graduate Education prior to surveying graduate students, the chair of the faculty prior to surveying members of the Faculty, the Vice President for Human Resources prior to surveying all non faculty employees and the Alumni Association concerning Alumni, regardless of the School/Department. Surveys cannot be sent to members of the bargaining units without clearing the study with each of the unions involved. All discussions with Union representatives be done by the appropriate person in Human Resources.

##### **B. Committee on Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects**

Whenever a survey is administered by an office at MIT or to an MIT population, the Committee on Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects needs to review the methodology. The extent of the review will depend upon the particular project (see section III)

##### **C. Institutional Research / Survey Coordinator**

Whenever a survey is administered at MIT, the survey coordinator should be notified to insure that schedule and population conflicts are minimized. The survey administrator maintains a calendar of survey projects. It is important to avoid sending multiple surveys to the same population during the same time period. Whenever possible the survey coordinator will encourage combining surveys when the population and time period are the same.

##### **D. Information Systems**

Whenever a survey administered at MIT utilizes email invitations, the MIT Survey Service should be notified. Any substantial increase in the email traffic may cause a problem if it is not expected.

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#### II. Types of Surveys / Data Collection

There are several types of surveys and /or data collection administered. The type of survey and the level of privacy will determine whether approval is needed from the Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES).  
<http://web.mit.edu/committees/couhes/index.shtml>

##### **A. Institutional Research / Administrative Surveys**

These are surveys that conducted to collect data for administrative uses. This includes course evaluations, surveys of students concerning campus life and academic experiences, and customer satisfaction surveys. This includes surveys MIT administers to members of the extended MIT community, including Alumni, parents of students, applicants and neighbors.

##### **B. Surveys conducted as part of a research project**

When surveys/questionnaires are distributed and/or interviews are conducted for academic research purposes, they are subject to COUHES review.

Surveys/questionnaires should begin with statements that describe the purpose of the research and state that:

- participation is voluntary
- subjects may decline to answer any or all questions
- subjects may decline further participation, at any time, without adverse consequences
- confidentiality and/or anonymity are assured

Interviewers must inform their subjects of these same rights. Additionally:

- No coercion to participate should be involved
- Data collected will be reported in such a way that the identity of individuals is protected
- Proper measures will be taken to safeguard data

Ordinarily, written informed consent is not required but, for some types of interviews and questionnaires, COUHES may determine that written informed consent forms are required from participants.

When surveys are given electronically or online, COUHES may specify that on-line consent must be obtained. When this is required, investigators must provide a written description of study procedures, goals, and potential risks, and include a check box or button potential participants must click on - to signify understanding and consent - before they are able to view or respond to the survey.

COUHES requires that investigators complete an on line training program that is accessible at the following url: <http://web.mit.edu/osp/www/hs-training.htm>

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#### **C. Surveys conducted by Students**

All surveys conducted by students are required to have COUHES review and approval. Student questionnaires and interviews carried out for academic or other purposes are subject to COUHES review unless the supervising instructor or department head has cleared the project in advance with the COUHES chairman.

#### **D. External**

MIT is frequently asked to administer or facilitate the administration of a survey by an external organization. In some cases these are viewed the same as an institutional Research survey. Examples of this include the Survey of Earned Doctorates from the National Science Foundation

### **III. Privacy Issues**

Privacy and confidentiality issues are very important when collecting data at MIT. All surveys and web collection projects must clearly identify whether data is anonymous, confidential or not confidential and generally how it will be used. The **Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects** should be notified of each survey and furnished with information on the methodology being used and the purpose of the survey. COUHES will waive jurisdiction over surveys or interviews that are carried out as part of the administrative responsibility of the surveyor and in which the data are non-sensitive and will be used for MIT purposes only. **COUHES retains the right to decide when to waive jurisdiction and therefore must receive appropriate documentation prior to the administration of the survey.** It is expected that appropriate attention will be given to voluntarism, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

Sensitive data includes, but is not limited to, questions regarding academic performance, religion, ethnicity, sex, alcohol consumption and use of illegal drugs.

#### **A. Anonymous Responses**

Survey respondents cannot be identified. All information about the respondent is provided at the time the survey is completed.

#### **B. Confidential Responses**

Survey respondents can be linked with other data, but the identities are either striped or kept confidential. For example, a survey may require an MIT certificate before a respondent is allowed to complete the questionnaire. Additional data may be linked to the survey response. The identity of the respondent may be striped out of the response prior to the data set being provided for analysis. Whenever an incentive is being provided, it is usually necessary to know who replies in order to award the incentive.

#### **C. Non-Confidential responses**

The identity of the respondent is known. Most data collections "surveys" are non-confidential and data is stored in an MIT system of record. An example of this would be the Physical Education Lottery or verification or updating of pre existing data.

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#### IV. Methodology

Survey methodology will vary by survey type and is generally the responsibility of the person sponsoring / administering the survey. This includes what questions are asked, what data is collected, who is surveyed, how they are invited to participate, when they are surveyed and how often they are contacted.

##### A. *Survey population*

When conducting a survey, the first decision a researcher must decide whether to send a survey to everyone in a particular group (census) or to a subset (sample). This decision will be driven by the size of the total population, cost and time. Regardless of this decision, it is important to include enough demographic questions on the survey to be able to determine whether the responses represent the target population.

Whenever a survey is administered at MIT is very important to consult with the Senior Officer / Senior Office about the survey group. For example, the Dean for Undergraduate Education should be consulted prior to surveying undergraduates, the Dean of Graduate Education prior to surveying graduate students, the chair of the faculty prior to surveying members of the Faculty, the Vice President for Human Resources prior to all non faculty employees and the Alumni Association concerning Alumni, regardless of the School/Department.

#### 1. **Students**

##### a) **Undergraduates**

When surveying undergraduate students it is customary to brief the Dean of Undergraduate Education and the Dean of Student Life prior to administering the survey. If undergraduate students in a particular school or department are surveyed, it is important to inform the cognizant dean or department chair.

##### b) **Graduate Students**

When surveying graduate students it is customary to brief the Dean of Graduate Education prior to administering the survey. If graduate students in a particular school or department are surveyed, it is important to inform the cognizant dean or department chair.

#### 2. **Faculty**

When surveying members of the faculty, it is customary to brief the chair of the faculty prior to administering the survey. If faculty in a particular school or department are surveyed, it is important to inform the cognizant dean or department chair.

#### 3. **Non-Faculty employees**

When surveying non-faculty employees, it is customary to brief the Vice president for Human Resources prior to administering the survey. If employees in a particular school or department are surveyed, it is important to inform the cognizant dean or department chair.

##### a) **Support Staff**

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When surveying support staff, it is customary to brief the Vice president for Human Resources and the Working Group on Support Staff Issues prior to administering the survey. If support staff in a particular school or department are surveyed, it is important to inform the cognizant dean or department chair.

#### **b) Service Staff**

When surveying service staff, it is customary to brief the Vice president for Human Resources prior to administering the survey. Human Resources will need to inform the cognizant union officials.

#### **4. Other members of the Extended MIT community**

##### **5. Alumni**

When surveying alumni, it is customary to brief the Alumni Association prior to administering the survey. If alumni of a particular school or department are surveyed, it is important to inform the cognizant dean or department chair, as well as the Alumni Association.

### ***B. Survey Instrument***

In order to determine whether respondents to a survey are representative of the targeted population, researchers include a series of demographic questions. These same demographic questions can be helpful in conducting cross survey analysis and longitudinal analysis of different data sets.

#### **1. Standard Demographic Questions**

When requesting demographic information, researchers should use standard demographic questions and responses. Otherwise trend analysis and cross-survey analysis can be difficult.

##### **a) Gender**

##### **b) Ethnicity**

There are currently seven basic ethnic / race categories used in the MIT systems of record. This is likely to change in the next few years so that individuals may identify with more than one category. This, however, is considered a sensitive category and care must be exercised in reporting. Generally public reports do not differentiate by ethnicity.

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- (1) *White*
- (2) *Black*
- (3) *Hispanic*
- (4) *Native American*
- (5) *Asian*
- (6) *International (not a us citizen or permanent resident)*
- (7) *Unknown or choose not to report*

**2. MIT Status**

There are standard categories indicating where an individual fits into the MIT organization. It is important to know which category an individual respondent fits into if for no other reason than to understand response bias.

**a) Employment Categories**

- (1) *Tenure Track Faculty*
- (2) *Other Academic and Instructional Staff*
- (3) *Research Staff*
- (4) *Medical Staff*
- (5) *Administrative Staff including librarians*
- (6) *Support Staff*
- (7) *Service Staff*
- (8) *Contract employees (do not have MIT appointments)*

**b) Undergraduate Class Year (1 - 5)**

**c) Graduate degree goal**

- (1) *Masters (including ENG degree)*
- (2) *Doctoral*

**d) Departments / Disciplines / MIT Course Number or Designation**

**3. Non Demographic Questions**

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There are a number of non-demographic questions that are often included on different survey instruments. This includes general satisfaction questions, would you do it again type questions and would you recommend MIT to someone else. It is useful to review survey instruments that have been used previously and repeat relevant questions.

It is important to use consistent scales. There is some debate about numbering systems in scales. In satisfaction questions many people prefer using an odd number scale where the mid number represents neither a positive or negative view. Other people prefer an even number scale that forces a positive or negative response. Whenever possible surveys should use scales consistent with previous surveys.

#### **C. Timing**

##### **1. Fall**

Generally surveys administered to students and members of the faculty have the best response rate if they are administered between the middle of October and the week prior to Thanksgiving. Surveys administered to employees and alumni should not be administered between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

##### **2. Spring**

Generally surveys administered to students and members of the faculty have the best response rate if they are administered between the middle of February and the month following Spring Break.

#### **V. Notification**

It is customary to notify individuals who will be asked to complete a survey prior to the administration of the survey. When administering an electronic / web survey, these invitations are best done using an electronic medium such as email. The second contact would be the invitation to participate and instructions for accessing the survey. A week or ten days after the initial invitation, a follow-up request should be sent to non-responders. Non-responders should generally not be contacted more than two times.

##### **A. Personalized invitations**

Whenever possible email should be personalized and sent to individuals. This can be done using a merge function.

#### **VI. Incentives**

In order to increase survey response rates, it is not unusual to offer incentives to individuals when they complete the survey. The most common incentive is to enter respondents into a lottery and award prizes to a subset of the total. It is important to note that at MIT incentives should be positive. For example, gift certificates to individuals who have submitted a survey. Negative incentives might be denying an individual something, like tickets to graduation, if they do not complete. **Negative incentives are not permitted at MIT.**

#### **VII. Analysis**

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#### **A. Standard Programs**

Survey data is usually analyzed using one of the many statistical programs available commercially.

1. **SAS**
2. **SPSS**
3. **Other statistical programs**

#### **VIII. Reporting**

It is important that data collected through a survey or other similar project is analyzed and made available for use by appropriate offices. Sometimes the distribution of the results is best accomplished by issuing a formal report of the findings. However, not all surveys result in formal reports. Many times survey data is collected to as part of a larger project and is incorporated in one or several reports. Some surveys are repeated annually or periodically and the data is made available to committees, senior officers or other individuals who are interested in one or more aspects of the survey results. Whatever method is going to be used for the distribution of the data, it is important to let the survey audience know what they should expect.

##### **A. Public reports**

Public reports are public and care should be taken that public results do not allow for incorrect conclusions or invidious comparisons. In general, public reports should not compare results by ethnicity, race, gender or specific living group in the case of students. Extreme care should be taken to protect the privacy of the individual and conclusions should not be made when the number of individuals in a specific group is small, i.e., 5 or less.

1. **Paper**
2. **WEB**

Electronic versions of reports can be posted through the sponsoring offices web site. They can also be posted through the [Surveys@mit](mailto:Surveys@mit) website.

#### **IX. Archiving**

Data collected using surveys or other web collection methods should be preserved for future uses, if appropriate. In order to make the data useable, it is important to archive the survey instrument, a codebook, and the data, at a minimum. The preservation of the analysis and any reports is also very useful.

##### **A. Survey Instruments and methodology**

Survey instruments and methodology exist as a document (Word.doc) or HTML code. Whenever possible their should be an electronic version stored as a text file.

##### **B. Codebook**

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A codebook is a document that provides variable names and values. It includes the survey questions.

#### **C. DATA**

Data can be archived in its original format, although there should be an ASCII version. When surveys are repeated, data may be able to be merged to facilitate longitudinal analysis.

#### **D. Analysis**

#### **E. Reports**

#### **F. Access to archived materials**

Once data is archived, individuals may wish to access specific datasets for additional analysis. The value of data will be greatly enhanced if it can be used for multiple purposes. However, any access to data must be for legitimate institutional or academic research uses and the original guarantees, if any, of confidentiality must be honored. The decision to allow access to survey data must be made by the original researcher and/or the immediate director/senior officer and the survey coordinator.

##### **a) Protocol for requesting access**

Access to data must be given by the project leader of the specific project. In cases, where a specific individual has changed positions or left the institute, the department head/supervisor or senior officer must give permission.

##### **b) Agreement on use of data**

The use of the data will depend upon the type of survey and sensitivity of the topic. In all cases the privacy of the individual must be protected. If the use of data differs substantially from the original use (academic use of administrative data) COUHES must be informed.