

Cheng Chat by Richard Kearney



Creating Effective Surveys

Surveys are the bread and butter of social science research, and plenty of surveying is done right here at William Paterson University.

We've got many degree programs – at least one in every college - that require a course in research methods. Students with questionnaires in hand fan out across campus each semester looking for willing respondents. The Library is a popular spot for students looking to collect data with surveys.

Librarians can also help you design high-quality surveys by guiding you to samples, handbooks and databases that offer practical tips.

Many students tell us that the fun part of a sociological or marketing research project is going out and collecting data. After all, you can meet some new and interesting people that way.

But don't jump the gun! Good surveys demand good planning.

Writing survey questions before you have a clear idea of your project's objectives, or a hypothesis you want to test, or a research question you want to answer, can cause big problems when you start looking at that stack of completed surveys and find a major disconnect between what you wanted and what you got.

Or maybe your project was supposed to include the use of specific statistical tests but you wrote your survey questions in such a way that only nominal data was collected? This is a big problem too.

Many high-quality surveys can look quite simple, but the best ones involve lots of thought and planning to avoid trouble down the road.

If you want the time and effort you invest in that research project to be repaid with good results – and a good grade! – make sure to do that critical advance work before you start writing survey questions.

Be clear about what you want to know, and why. People who agree to take your survey have limited time, so every question you ask needs to be clearly written and connected with the specific objectives of your survey. Even a very short list of two or three clear outcomes can be an indispensable tool when it's time to write questions.

We use a lot of ordinary language in social research, but many common words mean different things to different people. If you want to study things like *success*, or *poverty*, or *injustice*, or *customer satisfaction*, or countless other subjects, you must take the time and trouble to be explicit about how you define them.

Doing this will be enormously helpful when it's time to come up with empirical measures and write survey questions to capture such information.

While there are many other steps involved in designing good surveys, these key tasks at the start of a project are most important.

The Library invites you to learn more about the resources it provides for survey design at our upcoming workshop, “Designing High-Quality Survey Questionnaires Using Library

Resources.” We’re offering this on **Thursday, November 6, at 4:00 pm** in the Cheng Library’s Paterson Room. Bring your projects, bring your questions, and find out how we can help you!