

Writing Effective Survey Questions: A Resource Guide

Surveys are a powerful way to learn from students and staff about their experiences, satisfaction, and learning. The quality of your data depends on the quality of your questions. This guide offers best practices for writing clear, concise, and purposeful survey questions, with examples relevant to Student Affairs.

1. Keep Surveys Manageable in Length

- Aim for brevity. A survey should take 5–10 minutes to complete unless it’s a special assessment project.
- Prioritize key information. Ask only what you need to know, not what is “nice to know.”
- Use skip logic when appropriate to avoid burdening respondents with irrelevant questions.

2. Match Question Types to Your Purpose

When to Use	Best Question Types	Example
Event feedback/ satisfaction	Multiple choice, Likert scale (1–5 agreement/satisfaction), 1–2 open-ended questions	“Overall, how satisfied were you with this event?”
Student/ staff satisfaction	Scales for consistency (e.g., Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree), rank-order for priorities, open text for elaboration	“To what extent do you agree: My supervisor supports my professional development.”
Pre-/ Post-test (learning or skills)	Same questions before and after, phrased clearly	“How confident are you in using campus resources?” (Pre vs. Post)
Program learning outcomes	Multiple choice (knowledge checks), agreement scales, scenario-based questions, 1–2 open-ended	“As a result of participating, I feel more prepared to... [options].”

3. Craft Clear, Neutral, and Purposeful Questions

- Be specific. Avoid vague terms like “often” or “good.”
- Stay neutral. Do not lead respondents toward a “right” answer.
- Avoid double-barreled questions. Each item should ask about one thing only.
- Ensure response options are balanced. Include both positive and negative ends of a scale.

4. Bad vs. Good Question Examples

Event Feedback

Bad: Did you like the event?

- Too vague, no scale, no nuance.

Good: Overall, how satisfied were you with the event? (1 = Very Dissatisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied)

Student/Staff Satisfaction

Bad: My advisor and my supervisor helped me succeed.

- Double-barreled: two people, one question.

Good:

1. My advisor helped me succeed.
2. My supervisor helped me succeed.

Pre-/Post-Test

Bad: Did you learn something new?

- Yes/No gives little insight.

Good: How confident are you in explaining the steps to access financial aid resources? (Scale: Not at all confident → Very confident)

Program Participation (Learning Outcomes)

Bad: This program was helpful, right?

- Leading, biased wording.

Good: As a result of participating in this program, I feel more connected to the campus community. (Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree)

5. Tips for Open-Ended Questions

- Keep them few and purposeful (1–3 per survey).
- Ask for specifics: “What suggestions do you have to improve this program?” instead of “Any comments?”
- Place them at the end of the survey to avoid fatigue.

6. Final Checklist Before Survey Launch

- Does each question connect to a decision or action you plan to take?
- Is the language simple, clear, and unbiased?
- Are your scales balanced and consistent?
- Will the survey take fewer than 10 minutes to complete?
- Did you pilot test the survey with a colleague or a student employee?

The best survey questions are short, specific, unbiased, and aligned with your goals. By following these practices, you will gather data that truly informs your programs and helps tell your data story.