

**Survey Advisory Committee:  
2011-2012 Annual Report  
Prepared by Nancy Whelchel, Chair  
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**Introduction**

In September, 2011 Provost Warwick Arden created the Survey Advisory Committee (SAC), charging it to investigate the extent of survey activity on campus and to recommend actions to address perceived problems with the possible over-surveying of our students, faculty and/or staff. SAC was also charged with developing recommendations for strategies to help improve the quality of surveys administered by NC State faculty, staff and students to members of the University community. (See Appendix A for a copy of the appointment letter and charge.) The ultimate goal of the committee is to help the university and its constituents effectively and efficiently collect the most accurate and useful data possible to inform program assessment and decision-making.

The committee, chaired by Dr. Nancy Whelchel, Associate Director for Survey Research in the University Planning and Analysis office, consists of 21 members, representing targeted administrators, faculty, staff, and students with interest, experience, and/or expertise in campus surveys. (See Appendix B for a list of SAC members and the unit they represent.) The full committee met four times during AY11-12, with various subcommittees meeting several additional times throughout the year. (See Appendix C for meeting minutes.)

This report provides a summary of SAC activities during AY11-12, and offers detailed recommendations developed as a first step in addressing its charge. In brief, we recommend

- **A registration process for administering a survey**
  - Any NC State faculty, staff or student (individual or unit/organization) planning on administering a survey to 100 or more NC State students, faculty and/or staff must first complete and submit an online Survey Registration Form.
  - Prior to assisting someone not affiliated with NC State with the administration of a survey to any number of our students, faculty, and/or staff, an NC State administrator, faculty, or staff member must “sponsor” the survey project and complete the Survey Registration Form.
- **A Google calendar to provide information about survey activities**
  - UPA create and maintain a publicly viewable campus-wide Survey Activities Calendar on Google. The Survey Activity Calendar will include basic information about surveys being administered to NC State students, faculty and/or staff, as recorded in the Survey Registration Form (i.e., name of survey, survey population, field dates).
- **Centralized procedures for identifying survey populations and selecting samples**
  - Require researchers to work with UPA to obtain samples for surveys. This will enable UPA to track the number of times groups and/or individuals are asked to participate in a survey, and, when possible, limit how often any one individual is asked to participate in a survey.
- **The continuation of the Survey Advisory Committee**
  - Current recommendations rely on a phased-in approach for developing and implementing survey oversight activities. SAC believes that in order to provide a scope of activities that effectively understands, addresses, and improves surveying on campus the committee needs to be re-appointed on an on-going basis.

These initial steps will help to inform SAC about the extent of survey activity on campus, and thereby help direct proposed future actions to better manage and assist in improving the quality of such surveys. Importantly, we anticipate that the registration process itself and access to information about other surveys via the Survey Activities Calendar will help to make those considering a survey more mindful of the extent of surveying on campus. Merely informing the campus community about survey activities could in itself lead to better coordination of surveys, including eliminating those that are unnecessary and/or not in the best interest of the institution as a whole.

### **Current Evidence of Survey Fatigue on Campus, and Why Does it Matter?**

There appears to be a fairly widespread belief on campus (and beyond), with some actual evidence to support it, that the number of surveys in which students, faculty and staff are asked to participate has increased over the years. SAC members unanimously believe this to be the case, and anecdotally it is hard to find anyone who would disagree. UPA has increased the number of institutional surveys it administers. Academic and non-academic units across campus are conducting a growing number of surveys for assessment and program evaluation activities. Student leaders survey other students to gather information on issues of concern to them and their constituents. Instructors (particularly those teaching research methods) routinely assign survey projects to their students. UNC-GA requires NC State to participate in a series of local and national surveys on a permanent basis, as well as in the occasional special topics survey. Researchers from outside the institution regularly want to access our students for their funded research projects and dissertations. (Directors of programs at NC State that work with potentially hard to reach populations, such as the GLBT Center or Multicultural Student Affairs, report getting requests on an almost weekly basis to survey "their" students.)

The already growing support for awareness and coordination of survey activities on campus has resulted in UPA being made more aware of who is administering surveys, when they are being conducted, and who is being surveyed. While it is difficult to say with certainty from this information that more surveys are being administered - - perhaps we are now just more aware of them - - we are getting a much better sense of the extent to which seemingly duplicative information is being collected (sometimes even by different employees in the same office at the same time), competing surveys are being administered at the same time to the same populations, and individuals are asked to participate in multiple surveys during the course of semester.

Survey research professionals have documented declining response rates, and theorize that this is likely due to, at least in part, survey fatigue. There is concrete evidence that lower numbers of students are participating in the institutional surveys administered by UPA. For example, although the research design has not changed, the response rate for the Freshmen Survey was 69% in 2009, 61% in 2010, 59% in 2011, and 53% in 2012. Response rates for the Sophomore Survey have experienced an even more dramatic decline, going from 69% in 2006, to 55% in 2008 and 40% in 2010 (the most recent year it was administered).

Having a good response rate does not ensure that the data collected in a survey is going to be useful - - there are many other sources of error that can make even a survey with a very good response rate of limited use. However, assuming a solid research design (e.g., valid, reliable questions; appropriate messaging; unbiased sample selection), a good response is important. Research indicates that respondents can differ in important ways (e.g., their opinions and experiences) from nonrespondents. In addition, for many of our University surveys we need to be able to provide reports for various subgroups of the survey population (e.g., departments, underrepresented students), further supporting the need for a large respondent base.

### **Survey Oversight Activities: Lessons Learned from Other Institutions**

As a first step, a subcommittee of SAC explored similar activities at other universities. Through an online search they identified 25 institutions that, based on information available on their websites, have some guidelines and/or policy related to surveys on their campus. [It should be noted that they did not identify specific institutions (e.g., peers) to investigate, but rather focused on those that came up on a Google search for such guidelines/regulations.] These schools ranged the gamut, including community college systems, small private colleges, and large public Research I institutions. Using information available either online or through follow-up phone conversations the subcommittee completed a rubric about the guidelines/policies at each institution. (See Appendix D for a complete summary of their findings.)

Similar to NC State, the justification given by other institutions for survey oversight activities include

- Minimizing survey fatigue
- Maximizing participation in important university administration surveys
- Eliminating the collection of already-existing information

- Coordinating surveys collecting similar information
- Facilitating the development and administration of methodologically sound surveys
- Promoting effective sharing of results

Oversight activities at other institutions are typically coordinated by a university committee or the institution's IR office. Activities range from very informal suggestions or guidelines for survey projects to formal policies and review processes. Institutions typically take one or more of the following actions:

- Posting survey information on websites or calendars
- Controlling access to survey populations
- Requiring a campus sponsor for external surveys (i.e., those being conducted by individuals/organizations not affiliated with the institution)
- Educational outreach (e.g., survey best practices; information on survey oversight policies; inventories of existing surveys, including questionnaires and results)
- Review and approval of survey projects

Defining exactly what survey activities are included in oversight activities is also challenging, and varies from one institution to another. While some guidelines/policies specify that "all" surveys are subject to oversight, most provide a range of inclusion and/or exclusion criteria, based on, for example

- The size of the survey population/sample
- Who is conducting the survey and for what purpose (e.g., excludes faculty doing research, a unit surveying their own constituents, students doing a class project)
- The length of the survey

### **Considerations in Developing Recommendations**

Regardless of the institution and their activities, it is clear that while many campuses are concerned about the over-surveying of their students, and, to a lesser extent, their faculty and staff, it can be challenging and time-consuming to address the problems. Individuals responsible for such activities indicated that incentives for following guidelines or policies were often lacking, and penalties for not doing so either non-existent or hard to enforce. Faculty members are particularly wary of anything that appears to impinge on academic freedom. In addition, there are many unknowns.

However, by all accounts the reality is that survey fatigue is a growing problem, resulting in declining response rates. It is becoming increasingly difficult to collect and provide meaningful survey data to better enable campus leaders to make informed decisions, for administrators to use in planning and assessment, and for scholars to use in their research. The SAC members believe that it is essential that we take steps, as an institution, to attempt to address this growing problem. In what follows below we outline possible challenges we have identified, and how we propose to address them at NC State.

### **Outcomes**

The actual effect that survey oversight activities at other institutions have in managing surveying on their campus is, according to our exploration of such activities, unclear. For example, while anecdotally our informants felt the effects had been positive, we could not get concrete evidence that participation rates in those surveys that are administered has gone up, and/or if the quality and usefulness of the data collected has improved. The various recommendations proposed by SAC would provide metrics, which, along with other analyses, would help to measure the success of our efforts. Specifically, SAC and UPA survey staff will attempt to measure outcomes in the short term by tracking changes in response rates to on-going surveys, such as the Sophomore and Graduating Senior Surveys. We will also be able to count the number of surveys in which any given individual is asked to participate. In the longer term, we will be able to track changes in the total number of surveys administered on campus, and in particular the number of overlapping surveys (either in terms of content or administration dates).

### **Public Records Requests**

SAC discussed the implications of being a public institution, and setting policy that could result in denying a request for public records. As a public institution, is it illegal to deny a request by someone (internal or external to NC State) for a list of email addresses? Typically such request for public records must be granted without questioning the purpose for the request (i.e., that they will be used to distribute a survey). University counsel on SAC encouraged the group to go forward with limiting such access, arguing that it can be appropriately justified.

### ***Red Tape***

Adding a bureaucratic layer to the process for individuals/units to administer a survey is another concern of SAC. As a result, these initial recommendations include collecting only a relatively small amount of information about proposed surveys that should be quick and easy for the researcher to provide. At the most basic level, SAC members believe that if the PI cannot readily provide the requested information it raises potential concerns about the quality of the overall research design.

### ***What Activities are Included?***

Perhaps the most challenging question for SAC to address was identifying specific criteria to determine whether a survey project needed to be included in the survey registration process. Factors like the size of the population, the purpose of the activity, the length of the survey, and who is conducting the survey were all considered. Specific details are outlined below in the recommendations, but we ultimately decided to keep it clear and simple for now, with the option of re-evaluating after the process has been in effect for a year.

### ***Too Much Information?***

SAC also discussed possible implications of making information about surveys being administered on campus publicly available via the Survey Activities Calendar. For example, units might be justified in wanting to limit awareness of surveys related to performance. Data intended for internal purposes only might become part of a public records request if the media were aware of the survey. The proposed strategy for limiting access to the Survey Activities Calendar to those with appropriate NCSU credentials should help to minimize such concerns.

### ***Campus Buy-In and Educational Outreach***

In order to enhance campus buy-in it will be very important to educate the campus community about the survey registration process, the reasons for it, and the expected benefits. UPA will create a web site with detailed information about the process, and members of SAC and/or the UPA survey team will give brief presentations on the process to key constituent groups across campus. We believe buy-in will be enhanced by including an educational component, geared towards sharing and promoting best practices in survey research. SAC, which includes several members with expertise in survey research, as practitioners and/or as instructors of research methods, will develop and maintain a web site with such educational materials. In addition, as time permits, individual SAC members can be available to consult on survey projects.

### ***Unit Cooperation and Coordination***

SAC includes members from key units across campus. During our discussions it became very clear that for the recommended oversight activities to be successful it is essential that such units coordinate with each other and share information. For example, as a result of these and earlier discussions IRB has developed processes to inform UPA when proposals involving surveys of NC State students, faculty or staff have been submitted to them for review. When Registration and Records gets a request for contact information for a survey, they need to forward that request to UPA. Further, given that the Survey Registration Form asks for confirmation that the unit senior leadership is aware of and approves the survey activity being conducted by a member of its staff, there should be more awareness of such survey activities and therefore cooperation and coordination within individual units (something that has been an issue in the past).

### ***Incentives and Penalties***

In order for any survey oversight activities to work it is essential that member of the campus community be incentivized to participate in them, and that there be repercussions for not doing so. Creating official

policy or regulations is an important first step. Helping the campus understand the reasons for creating the registration process, along with the likely benefits - - both personal and to the institution - - from participating in it will, SAC believes, incentivize those planning a survey research project. The possibility of getting better, more useful data should encourage cooperation. In addition, it is possible that some researchers going through the registration process will seek out consultation from SAC and/or UPA survey staff, with the possible outcome of a better research design.

SAC recommends that penalties for not completing the registration form be limited in the first year to reminders about the policy and the reasons for it, with the appropriate supervisor copied on any correspondence. In addition, UPA will not provide researchers with requested contact information until the registration form has been submitted. As administrators for our university-wide Qualtrics account, UPA can also prevent a survey being administered on Qualtrics from going live until the registration form has been created. However, as all these depend on several factors (e.g., UPA being aware of surveys, UPA being asked for sample contact information, the survey being administered on Qualtrics), their effectiveness is somewhat limited.

### ***Workload***

It is very clear that even relatively modest oversight activities will require additional work on the part of at least some SAC members, and in particular the survey staff at UPA that is charged with implementing them. While the current proposed recommendations should be manageable, going on to the next steps will possibly require additional resources (i.e., a Graduate RA position or even another full-time staff position).

## Phase I Recommendations

1. **Establish a University regulation regarding a survey registration process**, the purpose of which is to systematically collect information on surveys being administered to NC State students, faculty, and staff. The regulation does not relate to research being conducted by NC State faculty, staff or students on populations external to the University.
  - a. Any NC State faculty, staff or student planning on administering a survey to 100 or more NC State faculty, staff, and/or students would need to complete and submit an online "Survey Registration Form." Exceptions to this requirement are:
    - i. Faculty and/or students doing surveys of the students in their class (regardless of the number of students)
    - ii. 'Point-of-contact' or 'event' surveys (e.g., administering a survey to people who have just participated in an activity, such as an assessment survey after a presentation)
  - b. Any survey being conducted by someone not affiliated with NC State requires a an NC State "sponsor" - - that is, someone at NC State who has given some thought to the project and why our students, faculty or staff should participate in it. Regardless of the size of the survey population or the distribution method (e.g., providing the external requestor with a list of email addresses, forwarding a survey link via a listserv) the sponsor is required to complete the Survey Registration Form prior to assisting with the administration of the survey.
  - c. Information about the policy be widely distributed, via D3 memo, media outlets (e.g., The Bulletin, the Technician), the University web site, and brief presentations by UPA survey staff and/or SAC members to campus groups.
  - d. The Survey Registration Form asks for the following information: (See Appendix E for a copy of the form, or view live version online at <http://go.ncsu.edu/survey.registration.form>)
    - i. Contact information for the PI, and for the sponsor for external surveys
    - ii. The title of the survey and a brief description of the its purpose and content
    - iii. How and when the survey is going to be administered
    - iv. The survey population (e.g., African American undergraduates, staff in Finance and Business, NTTs) and how many people in that group will be invited to participate.
    - v. The name, title, and office of the appropriate administrator or faculty member who is aware of and has approved the survey. For example, advisors/instructors should be aware of their students conducting a survey, a department head should be aware of a survey their faculty are conducting (again, this only applies to surveys of NC State faculty, staff, students, so typically not faculty research); the Director of the Bookstores should be aware if someone is conducting a survey on satisfaction with the Bookstores)
  - e. The Survey Registration Form will not be used during this initial phase to evaluate a project or to approve or deny its administration.
  - f. SAC is given the authority to contact the survey administrator and the appropriate supervisor when they learn that a survey meeting the above criteria has been administered without a Registration Form being completed, for the purpose of informing them about the policy.
  - g. The Qualtrics administrators in UPA be given the authority to limit the ability of Qualtrics users to launch their survey if the Survey Registration Form for the project has not been completed.
2. **UPA develops and maintains a 'Survey Administration Calendar'** that those with appropriate NC State credentials can access, on which information about all registered surveys will be posted. Quickly viewable information will include the name of the survey, the dates during which it is expected to 'be live,' and who is administering it, and who the population is. Those interested in getting more information would be able to view what is essentially the completed Survey Registration Form for the project. (See <http://upa.ncsu.edu/srvy/oth/ncsu-surveys-calendar>)
3. **UPA is given responsibility for managing the process for selecting samples for surveys** of NC State students, faculty, and staff, as appropriate (e.g., a College surveying its students would

not need to go through UPA [but they would still need to complete the Registration Form]. Further, UPA is given the authority to deny providing requested contact information if the Registration Form for the project has not been submitted.

4. **The Survey Advisory Committee should be reappointed on an annual basis.**
  - a. SAC membership should be updated to reflect turnover in administrative and other positions represented on the committee.

#### **Phase 2 Recommendations and Future Goals**

Throughout AY12-13 and AY13-14 SAC will continue to systematically collect information via the Survey Registration Form, post information to the Survey Activities Calendar, and will create and update an Educational Outreach website. During this time we will also assist in providing information about the regulations to the campus community (e.g., through presentations to administrative leadership groups, units, etc.). At the end of AY13-14, SAC will evaluate both the overall process and the specific strategies involved (e.g., what information is requested on the Registration Form), and determine what, if any, revisions should be implemented in the future. SAC will continue discussions related to broadening the Registration Process to include a review and approval process.