



Ethical Principles in Survey Design Huron Research Ethics Board Guidance Document

(March 2021)

Many surveys are conducted on campus, designed and run by staff, students and faculty on a wide range of topics.

Surveys that are conducted for the purposes of research must receive approval from the Huron Research Ethics Board (REB). If you are unsure whether your survey needs approval, contact huronreb@uwo.ca and consult the Western Research guidance document on distinguishing between research and quality assurance (linked below).

Whether or not a survey requires REB approval it must conform to best practices and ethical standards of survey design. The following guidance notes are intended to provide an introductory overview of key ethical issues in survey design, and suggestions for addressing them.

Informed Consent

It is critical that potential participants are presented with an informed choice before participating in a survey. Participants must have a clear understanding of what they are being asked to do. They must be able to freely choose to participate or not.

It is the responsibility of those conducting the survey to:

- clearly explain to participants the purpose of the survey, and that they are free to choose to participate,
- actively consider power dynamics between researcher and participant, and to seek to mitigate them so that survey participation is in fact voluntary, and
- explain to participants what risks and benefits may exist (to themselves and to others) by participating.

Suggestions for survey design:

1. Have a clear introduction to your survey that provides full information to participants. Who is the survey being sent by? Why is information being collected? What will happen to the information? Will participants be able to see, or benefit from, survey results? Consider modifying the REB Letter of Information template to structure your survey introduction to ensure you include all relevant information.
2. If there are multiple data collection pieces (e.g., multiple linked surveys, or a survey and focus group, etc.) clearly explain the relationship between these different pieces, and the purpose of each. Can a participant choose to complete one and not the other?

3. Pay attention to the power dynamics of the specific context of the survey. In cases of unequal power relationships (between campus leaders and students, or between employers and employees) every reasonable step must be taken to keep data collection at arms-length so that participation is free and voluntary. Questions and concerns should likewise be as much as possible directed to an independent party. If participation is mandatory as part of employment conditions or to maintain student status this should be clearly stated, and the consequences of participation or non-participation should be clearly stated.
4. Make it clear to participants whether, and how, they can exit the survey or withdraw their data if they choose to do so.

Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality

Participants should have a clear understanding where their data is going, who will have access to it, and in what form. It is the responsibility of those conducting the survey to provide clear explanations to participants of the terms privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality, and to use these terms consistently throughout data collection

- Anonymity: refers to responses that cannot be tracked back to the individual participant (i.e., the researcher will have no idea from the start who the participant is and will not be able to find out)
- Confidentiality: refers to responses in which the participant identity is linked to the responses they provide. In this case the researcher is aware of the participant identity and their responses, but takes steps to ensure that the identity of the participant is not discovered by others beyond the specified research team.
- Privacy: refers to an individual's right to be free from intrusion or interference by others and is related to the process of obtaining informed consent, such that the participant is aware of how the information they provide is going to be used. Privacy is respected if an individual has an opportunity to exercise control over personal information by consenting to, or withholding consent for, the collection, use and/or disclosure of information.

Suggestions for survey design:

1. Do not conflate the terms privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality in any of the data collection materials or information provided.
2. Ensure it is clear to the participant who will have access to which data.
3. If some parts of the survey are confidential and others are anonymous, ensure this is made clear to the participant. Not all surveys can be fully anonymous.
4. If some form of compensation is being offered for survey completion (e.g. enter your email to win X prize), set up the survey to protect participant anonymity by linking a separate survey where the email address can be entered which cannot be linked back to survey data submitted.
5. Consider context. In the case of a very small participant pool at a small institution like Huron, is anonymity really possible? What about in the case of qualitative data collection? These scenarios should be identified to the participant. If relevant, explain how you will mitigate these scenarios to protect confidentiality.

Use and Management of Data Collected

Participants should have clear information as to how their data will be used, where their responses will be stored, and with what level of security.

Suggestions for survey design:

1. Use Qualtrics to design and distribute your survey <https://mysurveys.uwo.ca/>
2. Clearly explain to participants what you will do with the data you are collecting.
3. If there are multiple data collection pieces ensure you explain any differences between use of data from different pieces. If the responses from the various components may potentially be linked, this should be indicated.
4. The plans for presenting or disseminating data should be clearly explained. If qualitative data is collected will direct quotes be used? In the case of quantitative data will results be presented in aggregate?
5. The participant should be informed as to how long the information collected will be kept and stored, and in what form (actual survey responses vs final product, such as a final report).
6. The participant should be informed of who will have access to the data and how confidentiality will be maintained.
7. Information should be provided as to where the information collected will reside, and who will be responsible for managing it and controlling access. If the data will be permanently deleted at some point this should be indicated. Any further plans for the data (e.g., keep the data to serve as a baseline for future comparison) should be clearly indicated.

Further Resources

Course on Research Ethics (CORE) Tutorial: <https://tcps2core.ca/welcome>

Western Research, Distinguishing between Quality Assurance/Improvement Program Evaluation, and Research

https://www.uwo.ca/research/docs/ethics/hsreb_guidelines/Distinguishing_Between_QA_QI_P_E_Research_10Sept2018.pdf

Huron REB Letter of Information Template (faculty access via Huron Internal Funding OWL page) <https://owl.uwo.ca/x/KY427d>

Introduction to Qualtrics (request access via Huron CURL OWL page) <https://owl.uwo.ca/x/Qg2FNy>