Guidelines for Office of Institutional Research Assistance with Online Surveys

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A central function of the Connecticut College Office of Institutional Research is to collect and analyze data and information to inform decision making by the president, senior administrators and directors, and faculty and College committees. Surveys are just one of many ways of collecting such information from faculty, students, and staff, and while various readily available online software platforms like Qualtrics and SurveyMonkey have made it easier and cheaper to create and administer surveys, it is still a very time- and labor-intensive form of research.

As surveys become easier to administer, we run the risk of over-surveying members of the College community and contributing to "survey fatigue" that over time may drive down response rates and lower the quality of data that surveys generate. With the advent of online surveying methods, the Office of Institutional Research has increasingly been asked to develop, administer, and/or report results of a wide variety of campus surveys. Procedures for scheduling and administering such surveys have historically been informal and have often worked satisfactorily. Increasingly, however, this informal system has led to an expectation of "surveys on demand" and has sometimes resulted a heavy clustering of surveys—particularly at the end of semesters—straining the Office's resources and crowding out other important work.

As part of its mission of gathering and analyzing data regarding the College's work, the Office of Institutional Research stands ready to assist various constituencies with survey research if their surveys satisfy certain criteria regarding their subject matter, survey design and question wording, scheduling, and Institutional Review Board review.

This document provides guidelines from the Office of Institutional Research to individuals interested in conducting a survey of Connecticut College students, faculty, and/or staff. It is not an official College policy, but rather a set of guidelines for making an informed decision about whether a survey is the most appropriate way for you to collect information you seek, and how to work with this Office to design or polish the survey, schedule its

administration, analyze the results, and use them to inform decision making. Most generally, these guidelines are intended to signal to potential surveyors the need to plan ahead and to work with the Office of Institutional Research to schedule surveys at appropriate times to avoid clustering. Survey results are only as good as the methods and practices that produce them, and high quality survey research takes time to plan and digest.

Deciding whether a survey is really necessary or appropriate
Before deciding whether administering a new online survey is the best way to gather the information you require, please consider the following other options.

- Administering a paper-based survey
- Using qualitative data-gathering methods such as interviews, focus groups, or open meetings
- Reviewing existing data "on hand" in the Office of Institutional Research or elsewhere on campus. From our participation in other surveys over the years, we already have a great deal of information about our students and their behaviors and attitudes on a large number of subjects. Please consult with the institutional researcher to determine whether the information you're seeking already exists.

Because creating a high-quality survey, administering it, and compiling and analyzing the data is very time consuming, surveys should probably be undertaken only when there is a good chance that the data will be useful in informing an actual, pending decision.

Office of Institutional Research criteria for assisting with online surveys
Because not all surveys are equally important to the mission of the College, this Office has an appropriate interest in limiting the number of surveys administered in a given semester or year, their length, the number of people surveyed, and the scheduling of the survey. Surveys meeting all of these criteria will be accommodated on a first come-first served basis with the understanding that not all surveys may be able to be accommodated.

Priority will be given to surveys that relate to one of the College's strategic priorities or other goals. Surveys requested by a senior administrator, senior director, or faculty or College committee will be given higher priority. Surveys sought by Student Government Association committees or other student organizations will be considered if they also have support from a senior administrator or director. In general, this Office is does not have the resources to assist with surveys for individual student projects (honors theses

or independent studies) or class assignments. Moreover, the Office is reluctant to assist with surveys intended mainly to generate political pressure on campus leadership to create a new program or policy.

Because of the time involved in reviewing draft survey questions, suggesting changes, creating an online survey, and determining the population to be surveyed, the Office of Institutional Research requires ample lead time. Four to six weeks is a good rule of thumb. Moreover, since surveys and survey requests tend to cluster at the ends of semesters, the earlier in the semester you contact this Office, the better. In no case can the survey process be initiated and completed within the final three to four weeks of the end of a semester.

To maintain survey quality and to minimize survey fatigue, the Office may also recommend limiting the number or type of questions and surveying small random samples of the appropriate College constituency rather than, say, "all students."

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Worksheet for developing and/or administering an online survey with the assistance of the Office of Institutional Research
To help this Office evaluate your request for assistance in developing, administering and/or analyzing results of an online survey, please answer the following questions and return them with a copy of your draft questions (if available) to John Nugent in Fanning 200, jdnug@conncoll.edu, ext. 5266.

1. Name of individual or organization requesting survey:

2. What information are you hoping to gain from this survey? What specific research questions do you want to answer?

3. What is currently known about this issue at Connecticut College and/or at other institutions? Have there been recent surveys or other information-gathering efforts?

4. What policy choices currently under consideration will be informed by the results of this survey?

5. Who would you like to survey (students, faculty, staff, alumni)? Is it critical that 100% of this population be asked to take the survey, or would a random sample be sufficient?

6. When would you ideally like the survey to be administered?

7. If you have already drafted survey questions, have you submitted them to the College's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board for comment and approval?

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