2012 Student Opinion Survey
for Stated-Operated Campuses

The State University of New York
System Administration
Office of Institutional Research
PROJECT PLAN

2012 Student Opinion Survey (SOS)
State University of New York

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Attachments

1. 2012 Student Opinion Survey
2. Number of SOS Responses Required
3. In-Class Ordering Instructions
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5. Informed Consent Letter
6. Ordering Reports
The State Operated colleges and universities of the State University of New York (SUNY) and the Fashion Institute of Technology plan to survey a sample of undergraduate students during the 2012 spring semester. The goal of the project is to determine how well campuses serve undergraduate students. The project will employ sound sampling techniques and utilize appropriate controls to protect the privacy of students participating in the survey.

GOAL AND USE

The goal of the Student Opinion Survey (SOS) is to evaluate the academic, student, and administrative programs, services and facilities provided to undergraduate students. Campus and System administrators use this information to identify areas requiring attention and/or further study and analysis. The SOS also identifies areas that are meeting and/or exceeding expectations.

Additionally, the Chancellor and System officials use the findings (1) to assess overall campus performance and (2) to evaluate the campus president. Summarizations of the SOS are included in the Chancellor’s Report Card without identifying specific institutions.

The responses to survey questions are not disclosed or used to make any judgments concerning individual students. Indeed, student participation in the SOS is voluntary.

The 2012 SOS is the tenth System-wide administration of this survey over the past thirty years. The last administration was in spring 2009. Since many of the
questions have been asked over the years, the SOS is a rich source of information charting change and improvement in the SUNY System.

STUDY POPULATION

The SOS study population are undergraduate students 18 years of age and older who are enrolled in at least one class on campus during spring semester 2012. Undergraduate students taking all of their course work via distance learning and/or at off-campus locations are excluded from the study population. Graduate students are also excluded from the study population.

A random sample of students meeting these qualifications are invited to respond to the SOS and asked to disclose their local ID. The local ID is requested so that responses to survey questions may be better understood by linking to other information maintained by the campus, such as the student’s enrollment history. Individual responses are used for analytical purposes and not be shared with instructors or other officials involved the student’s academic program. The SOS requires students to give permission by signature to use the local ID for this purpose. If a student does not grant permission, they may complete the SOS anonymously.

This information is disclosed in directions to the SOS and in an informed consent letter that accompanies the survey instrument. Also, the directions ask minor students (students under 18 years of age) not to respond to the survey. If a minor student happens to respond to the SOS the survey must be destroyed.

INSTITUTION REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

The SOS project should be approved by each campus’ institutional review board (IRB); or if a campus does not have an IRB, an appropriate official, such as the provost/academic vice president, vice president for student affairs, or other senior
assessment official. Approval is important so campus and System officials have the flexibility to use the survey findings broadly, e.g., in a seminar presentation and/or publication. However, IRB approval is not necessary for the SOS to be administered to students, because the purpose of the project is administrative not research, i.e., assessing the academic programs, services, and facilities provided to undergraduate students. If IRB approval is not obtained, a campus may continue with the SOS, but the use of the information is limited to the administrative functions internal to the institution.

Campuses need to provide SUNY’s Institutional Research Office a copy of the IRB approval or letter from the local official reviewing the project no later than March 31, 2012.

**BENEFITS OF THE SOS**

Undergraduate students are the primary customers of the State University and the programs, services, and facilities provided to these students form the core mission of the State University. While SUNY’s colleges and universities are highly complex institutions with many varied missions, understanding how undergraduate students view programs, services, and facilities is fundamental in evaluating how well SUNY’s colleges and university performs their mission.

Further, surveys such as the SOS are essential elements of Middle State’s accrediting standards, and as such, contribute to a climate of continuous improvement. At the present, SUNY’s campuses are engaged in a variety of assessment initiatives. The SOS is part of a growing body of information informing these imperatives and establishes benchmarks for charting progress over time.

Viewed in this context, the SOS is of high value to decision makers at all levels, and the 2012 SOS comes at a fortuitous time given the State’s difficult financial circumstances in recent years.
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The first SOS instrument was developed more than 30 years ago in collaboration with the American College Testing, Inc. (ACT). The survey was extensively revised in 2003 to improve the focus and reduce the length of the survey. For the 2012 SOS, a committee of campus and System representatives met in June 2011 to review the questions and format of the survey. The number of changes to questions was kept to a minimum to maximize continuity with previous administrations. The committee’s recommendations were sent to campuses for review in November 2011.

The 2012 SOS is designed to be completed in 20 to 25 minutes with an additional 10 minutes for local questions (the survey may be viewed at Attachment #1). Campuses may not eliminate or change any of the questions other than the local questions in Section VI of the survey. Section VI accommodates up to eighteen questions to address specific issues of interest to the campus. Each local question allows for up to twelve one-response options, i.e., check all that apply may not be used.

SAMPLE CONSTRUCTION

The goal of sampling is to construct a sample that yields valid estimates of the study population within a +/- 4% interval at the 95% level of confidence.

Representativeness in the sample is achieved in two ways: first, randomly selecting students so that characteristics, such as academic ability, full and part-time status, day and evening students, student demographics, etc., are reflective of the overall study population; second, obtaining a sufficient number of survey responses so experimental error (i.e., statistical uncertainty) falls within the desired level of statistical precision and confidence.

Attachment #2 identifies the minimum number of survey responses needed to achieve the level of precision desired in the project, and the number of surveys that must
be administered to students assuming differing rates of return. When planning to administer the SOS, SUNY recommends that campuses be conservative by adopting a lower-than-expected return rate.

SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

The SOS may be administered in-class or on-line. Either method is acceptable provided campuses use a randomly-constructed sample representative of the study population. Campuses have latitude in determining when to administer the SOS during the semester; although the project should be completed well before the end of the semester.

In-class Administration. The advantages of administering the SOS in-class are an immediate and high response rate. Also, the presence of a proctor is helpful in answering questions about the survey. When administering the SOS in-class, campuses purchase sufficient surveys from ACT to obtain the number responses required assuming a 50% to 70% return rate. This generally compensates for students not in class on the day the survey is administered.

To order surveys, campuses complete the In-class Order Form at Attachment #3 but first must verify that the students enrolled in the classes sampled are representative of the study population.

Some faculty may not be willing to use class time to complete the SOS, but will allow the survey to be distributed and collected the following class meeting. This is acceptable; however, campuses should assume a return rate no higher than 50% to account for students forgetting to return the survey.

When constructing the sample, the basic sampling unit is the class section. To ensure overall representativeness in the sample, campuses begin with a listing of all undergraduate class sections taught on the main campus with enrollments of more than
10 students. After randomizing the list, campuses begin at the top and proceed through the list drawing classes into the sample. The class list should be constrained so that once a course section is selected no other class from the same academic unit is included in the sample until the list is exhausted. This process is repeated until the numbers of students required are enrolled in the classes sampled given the assumed rate of return.

The institutional research office should analyze the students enrolled in the classes sampled to identify duplicates (students enrolled in multiple sections sampled). Proctors must inform these students to respond only once to the SOS. Also, campuses must analyze the characteristics of the students in the sample to verify that they are representative of the study population. If not, the sampling process must continue until a representative sample is constructed.

Campuses should return completed surveys to ACT for scoring using a mail service that allows the shipment to be tracked.

**On-line Administration.** Campuses administering the SOS on-line provide ACT the names, email addresses, and local IDs of students in the sample. When constructing the sample, campuses start with the population of undergraduate students 18-years of age or older taking at least one class on campus during the spring term. Campuses then draw students into the sample randomly. Campuses should verify that students in the sample are reflective of the study population before sending the sample to ACT.

ACT sends a personalized email message to the students with a link to the survey. The text used in the message is provided by the campus, along with the campus’ logo and colors and any other relevant information, e.g., a letter encouraging participation.
Campuses should send a pre-message to the students sampled altering them that an email from ACT is coming. ACT’s on-line features allow students to complete part of the survey, save their responses and return to complete the rest of the survey later. Also, ACT tracks respondents and sends up to three reminder messages to non-respondents.

The on-line administration method is flexible in that campuses may provide ACT additional student characteristics to enhance the usefulness of the survey, e.g., a student’s major. Also, the on-line administration allows campuses to easily oversample the study population. SUNY adjusts for oversampling when summarizing the SOS findings system-wide, but such strategies allow the SOS to be used for multiple purposes on campus.

To arrange for an on-line administration, campuses complete the On-line Order Form at Attachment #4.

INFORMED CONSENT

Participation in the SOS is voluntary. Students choosing to participate are asked to provide their local ID so their responses may be linked to other information maintained by the campus, e.g., a student’s enrollment history. In so doing, students greatly enhance the usefulness of the SOS to their campus.

In-class Administration. The directions on the SOS make clear the reasons for asking for the ID, and ask student’s to give permission to use the ID by signature (see page 1 of Attachment #1). A campus letter accompanying the SOS reiterates this purpose and encourages students to disclose the ID. The letter also promises not to release information in any way that identifies students responding to the survey (see suggested letter at Attachment #5). This letter and the directions must be read by the proctor before administering the survey in-class.
On-line Administration. When the SOS is administered on-line, the first screen student’s encounter explains the uses of the SOS, and asks for permission to use the local ID to link the responses to other data maintained by the campus. Students give their permission to use the ID for this purpose by electronic signature. If a student fails to grant permission to be identified in the survey, ACT removes the email address and other identifying information from the data file returned to the campus.

Underage Respondents. In planning to administer the SOS, campuses need to be careful not to include minor students (students less than 18 years of age). If an underage student happens to respond, campuses must destroy their survey. This is only a concern for in-class administrations because an underage student could be enrolled in a class sample and might respond even after being asked not to.

Letter. Along with the SOS instrument, a suggested informed consent letter is provided at Attachment #5. Campuses may use a locally developed letter in lieu of the one suggested. However, is a locally developed letter is used it must make clear (1) the voluntary nature of the SOS, (2) how the information will be used, (3) how the local ID will be used if disclosed, and (4) the exclusion of minor students.

REPORTS/RAW DATA

Completed surveys are returned to ACT for scoring and analysis. ACT provides System Administration and campuses a basic report summarizing the responses to each question along with anonymous comparisons to other SUNY colleges and universities in total and by sector. All of the ACT reports are based on aggregations of data and external institutional identifiers are removed. Additionally, campuses may order special reports from ACT for an additional fee (see reports available at Attachments #6).
ACT also provides System Administration and campuses with an electronic data file of survey responses. This file contains the local ID of students giving permission to use the ID.

SUNY prepares various reports from the electronic files for internal use and in the Chancellor's Report Card. The internal reports may highlight differences between campuses and sectors, as well as other relevant factors, such as institutional size, location, mission, and student selectivity, etc. Any external disclosures by SUNY will always be in aggregate and include appropriate protections to ensure both respondent and institutional anonymity. SUNY’s policy is to direct external requests for information about the SOS to individual campuses.

ACT is not authorized to release any SOS data to a third party without SUNY and campus approval.

RISK/BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

The SOS project as proposed here achieves the goals of the study while resulting in negligible risk to students and campuses. In fact, SUNY anticipates that students will welcome the opportunity to make their views known given the positive uses of the SOS and many will disclose their ID.

Since campuses administering the SOS in-class have copies of the completed survey (many of which contain names and IDs of students), the surveys must be stored in a locked cabinet under control of the Institutional Research Office. ACT returns the physical surveys to campuses after scoring. At the conclusion of the project, the completed surveys should be destroyed. Also, all electronic files must be maintained in secure, password protected medium.
EXPERIENCE OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

The SOS survey project is under the direction of the State University of New York’s Institutional Research Office. The principal investigators and campus contacts for this project are accustomed to surveying human subjects as part of the mission of institutional research. The history of this project has been excellent. No breech in procedures or security has surfaced in past administrations. For additional information, please contact the co-principal investigators listed on the front page of the project document.