HPAC COURSE · MODULE 4

# Asking

Surveys, focus groups, and listening online. Collecting evidence nobody has collected before.

Health Professions Affinity Community · Student research track

WHERE WE ARE GOING

# By the end of this module you can...



**Get permission first**

Know what to clear, with whom, before a single question is asked.



**Write a survey that works**

Questions that measure what you meant, in an order people will finish.



**Run a focus group**

A guide, a facilitator, a notetaker, and the skill of staying quiet.



**Listen on social media responsibly**

What it can tell you, what it cannot, and the lines you do not cross.



**Make sense of what you collected**

Themes from words, simple numbers from counts, and claims you can defend.

PERMISSION AND PURPOSE

# Before you collect anything

Two questions first: what decision will this data inform, and who has to say yes before I start?

## Ethics review

Go back to Module 1. If it is systematic, about people, and meant to generalize beyond your group, talk to the IRB before you collect. Approval does not work backward.

## The gatekeepers

Principal or program director, teachers whose class time you use, and the site where you will recruit. Get it in writing, even if writing means an email.

## Parent permission and youth assent

Anyone under 18 needs a parent or guardian's permission and their own agreement. Both. Build in two weeks for this.

## A plan for the data

Where it lives, who can see it, what has names attached, and when you delete it. Decide before, not after.

CHOOSING

# Which method answers which question

| Method | Best at | Weak at | Realistic scale for a student team |
|---|---|---|---|
| Survey | How many, how often, how strongly | Why people do what they do | 50 to 300 responses |
| Focus group | Why, and the words people use for it | Anything you want to count | 2 or 3 groups of 6 to 10 |
| One-on-one interview | Sensitive topics, one person's full story | Breadth, and speed | 8 to 12 interviews |
| Observation | What people actually do, not what they say | Reasons and intentions | A week of structured counts |
| Existing data | Trends, comparisons, and context | Your specific question | Free, and already collected |
| Social listening | What people say unprompted | Representing anyone in particular | A defined set of public posts |

**Most strong student projects use two: numbers for how big, and voices for why. That combination is what a judge remembers.**

SURVEY DESIGN

# Writing questions that measure what you meant

## Broken

- Don't you agree the cafeteria should serve better food?
- How often do you eat breakfast and lunch at school?
- Do you experience food insecurity?
- Rate the school's nutrition programming.
- What is your race and household income?

## Fixed

- How satisfied are you with the food served at lunch?
- In the last week, how many days did you eat school breakfast?
- In the last month, did you ever skip a meal because food was not available at home?
- How often do you see information about school meals?
- Ask only what your question needs, and say why you are asking.

**The four faults above: leading, double-barreled, jargon, and vague. The fifth is asking for personal detail you have no plan to use.**

BUILDING THE INSTRUMENT

# Response options and survey length

## Scales

- Use an odd number of points, usually five, with every point labeled
- Keep the direction consistent across the whole survey
- Never strongly agree on one question and never on the next

## Choices

- Options must not overlap, and must cover everything
- Include other, with a blank
- Include prefer not to answer on anything personal

## Open text

- Two or three at most, at the end
- Every open question is work to analyze later
- Ask one that earns its keep: what would actually help?

### Under 5 minutes

Roughly 10 to 15 questions. Response rates fall off a cliff after that.

### Easy first

Open with something quick and neutral. Save demographics for the end.

### Pilot with five people

Watch them take it. Every confusing question reveals itself in ten minutes.

### Anonymous or confidential

Anonymous means you never collect names. Confidential means you have them and protect them. Say which, honestly.

SAMPLING

# Who you ask decides what you learn

## Convenience sample

Whoever is in front of you: your class, your team, your feed. Fast, free, and what almost every student project actually does.

Say so plainly on your poster. It is honest, and it is not disqualifying.

## Representative sample

Chosen so the group mirrors the population you care about. Stronger claims, much more work.

If you cannot do it, do not write your results as though you did.

## Who is missing

Students who were absent, who do not have a phone, who do not speak English at home, who dropped out.

The people hardest to reach are often the people the project is about.

## Report the denominator

Not 68% of students. Say: of the 84 students who answered, 57 said yes. Every number on your poster should tell the reader how many people it came from.

THE LOGISTICS

# Setting up a focus group

## 6 to 10

**people**

Fewer and it stalls. More and the quiet ones disappear.

## 60 to 90

**minutes**

Long enough to get past the polite answers.

## 2

**of you**

One facilitator who talks, one notetaker who does not.

## 5 to 7

**questions**

That is genuinely all you will get through.

### Before they arrive

- A room where nobody can overhear, and a circle rather than rows
- Consent for participation and for recording, collected separately
- Food, if you can. It matters more than you think

### In the first two minutes

- Why you are here and what happens to what they say
- There are no wrong answers, and you can pass on any question
- What is said here stays here, and we ask the same of each other

WHAT YOU ACTUALLY ASK

# The discussion guide

| | |
|---|---|
| **Open** | Something everyone can answer in one sentence. Tell us your name and one thing you ate today. |
| **Warm up** | Broad and easy. What is it like to eat lunch at our school? |
| **Core** | Three or four questions carrying the project. Walk me through a morning when you skip breakfast. |
| **Stretch** | The imaginative one. If you ran the school, what would you change first? |
| **Close** | What did we miss? Is there anything you expected me to ask? |

**Ask how and what, not why. Why makes people defend themselves; walk me through it and what happened next get you the actual story.**

IN THE ROOM

# Facilitating without steering

## Count to five

After you ask, say nothing. The silence feels endless to you and normal to them. Somebody will fill it.

## Follow, do not lead

Say more about that. What was that like? Can you give me an example? Then stop talking again.

## Spread the air

I want to hear from someone we have not heard from yet. Name it kindly, before one voice takes the hour.

## Do not defend

If they criticize the program, or you, write it down and thank them. Arguing ends the data collection.

## Do not correct

If someone says something factually wrong, note it. Correct it after the session, not during.

## Write it down immediately

The notetaker types quotes verbatim. Both of you debrief within an hour, while you still remember the room.

**Your job is to be interested, not interesting. If you spoke more than a quarter of the time, run the next one differently.**

LISTENING ONLINE

# Research on social media

## What it is good for

- The words people use when nobody is asking them a question
- What is circulating right now in your school or neighborhood
- Which worries and rumors your project will have to answer
- Finding local organizations and events you did not know existed
- Testing whether a message you wrote lands the way you meant it

## What it cannot tell you

- How common anything is. Posting is not a sample of anyone
- What quiet people think, and most people are quiet
- Whether an account is a real person from here
- Anything with numbers attached. Likes are not evidence
- Why people do things. For that you have to ask them

**Use it to generate questions and to find language. Do not use it to count anything.**

ETHICS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

# The lines you do not cross online

## Public is not permission

A post being visible does not mean the person agreed to be studied, quoted, or put on a poster.

## Never a private space

No DMs, no private groups, no screenshots of a group chat, no accounts you had to be let into.

## Do not collect from minors' accounts

Even public ones. If your topic is teenagers, get the data by asking with consent, not by scraping.

## Report themes, not people

Say what people are talking about and how they talk about it. No usernames, no screenshots, no photos.

## Do not create an account to get in

Pretending to be someone else to access a community is deception, and it is not research.

## If you saw someone in danger

Stop being a researcher. Tell a trusted adult. This outranks every project.

**The test: would you be comfortable if the person you quoted read your poster and recognized themselves? If not, do not use it.**

ANALYZING WORDS

# Turning what people said into findings

### 1 Read it all first

Transcripts and open responses, start to finish, without marking anything. Get the shape of it.

### 2 Tag as you reread

A word or two in the margin for what each chunk is about. Cost. Timing. Embarrassment. Family.

### 3 Group the tags

Tags that belong together become a theme. Expect four to six, not twenty.

### 4 Count what you can

How many people mentioned each theme. Say how many of how many, never a percentage of eleven people.

### 5 Pick the quotes

One or two per theme, short, in their words. Never with a name attached unless they agreed.

### 6 Look for the disagreement

The person who said the opposite of everyone else is often the most useful thing you found.

**Two people should tag the same transcript separately, then compare. Where you disagree is where the interesting thinking happens.**

ANALYZING COUNTS

# Simple numbers, honestly reported

## What to report

- How many you asked, and how many answered
- Counts and percentages, with the denominator
- The range, not just the average, when responses spread out

## What to avoid

- Percentages from fewer than 20 responses
- Statistical tests you cannot explain out loud
- Charts with no axis labels or no units
- Dropping the responses that did not fit your hope

## What to say

- Among the students we surveyed at our school
- This is a convenience sample and may not represent everyone
- Here is what we could not measure



### Your limitations section is a strength

Every real study has one. Writing yours shows you understand your own work better than the team that pretends their sample was perfect.

DATA STEWARDSHIP

# Taking care of what people gave you

## Separate names from answers

If you must collect names, keep them in a separate file with a code number. Most projects never need names at all.

## Store it somewhere controlled

A school account, not a personal phone or a shared laptop. Decide who on the team has access.

## Delete on schedule

Set the date when you collect. When the project ends, the recordings and the name file go.

## Give it back

Present your findings to the people who answered your questions, before or alongside any conference.

## Giving it back is the part people skip

Communities get studied and never hear the results. Your project can be different, and reporting back is usually the moment a program actually changes something.

THIS WEEK

# Pick your method and draft the instrument

### Choose

One method, and one sentence on why it fits your question better than the alternative

### Draft

Ten survey questions, or a five-question focus group guide

### Clear it

List every person whose permission you need, with a date you will ask

### Pilot

Five people. Watch them. Fix what confused them

## The whole course in one line

You found a question worth asking, you learned what is already known, you checked what was credible, you read the evidence, and now you are adding something to it that did not exist before. That last part is what makes it research.

**Then back to Module 1**

Your data becomes a poster, and your poster becomes sixty seconds in front of someone who can change something.