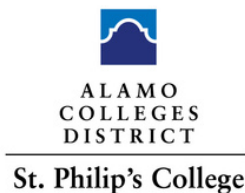


# Student Success Research Brief: Volume 1, Series 1

## Use of Surveys in Student Success and Unit Assessment



### Introduction

The following report is a research brief on the importance of surveys in unit strategic planning cycles and student success. As higher education has turned to using data to inform student services and student outcomes, surveys provide targeted insights into programming effectiveness and needs for units across colleges (Swaak, 2022). St. Philip's College is at a liminal moment for its culture of assessment. SPC now places a larger focus on metrics and how those metrics can inform decision making across all levels of the institution. As part of SPC's culture of assessment, surveys of all kinds, including in-house surveys, can help strategic unit planners determine whether their programming works. Surveys can help answer the question, "How does it work?" (Souza & Rose, 2021).

Surveys are a great tool that all units can use, when constructed properly, to gain insights on their performance. The importance of survey methodology cannot be understated, however, as surveys can have false conclusions and biased results if not developed using sound methodology (Royse et. al., 2015). Contracted surveys like CCSSE and the Trellis Financial Wellness survey are great tools that use tested methodology and are crafted using psychometrics with validity and reliability in mind.

Two SPC student success units are at various places in successfully implementing surveys to create a cycle of data-informed quality improvement: First Year Experience (under direction from Liz Castillo) and Financial Literacy (under direction from former director of Financial Literacy and current Interim Dean of Student Success Enida Rehome). This research brief issue highlights their insights from using both in-house and contracted survey instruments in strategic planning at the unit level. We interviewed the program director and the Interim Dean of Student Success to understand their experiences using surveys in their planning.

### First Year Experience

According to Liz Castillo, First Year Experience is designed to "help students from connecting right away once they are advised... till the end of their first year and launch them into their second year." Castillo utilizes two surveys, a beginning-of-the-year survey and an end-of-the-year survey in a pre-test/post-test approach, to measure student changes in specific concepts. Castillo's unit is then able to change programming and resources based on these results. For instance, First Year Experience recently focused on students' understanding of SPC systems. To gain insight, Castillo asked the question, "Please tell us how you feel about your understanding of how the College's student systems function (e.g., registration, dropping a class, Canvas, Aces.)" In her first year of programming she realized that there was low confidence across the board. She then created videos for the "video library on [her] webpage." Liz stated that her videos allow for her to reach students: "Through video I have been able to duplicate myself." This makes her work more effective and effective because students have a ready to go source.

**Figure 1: FYE Confidence in Campus Systems**

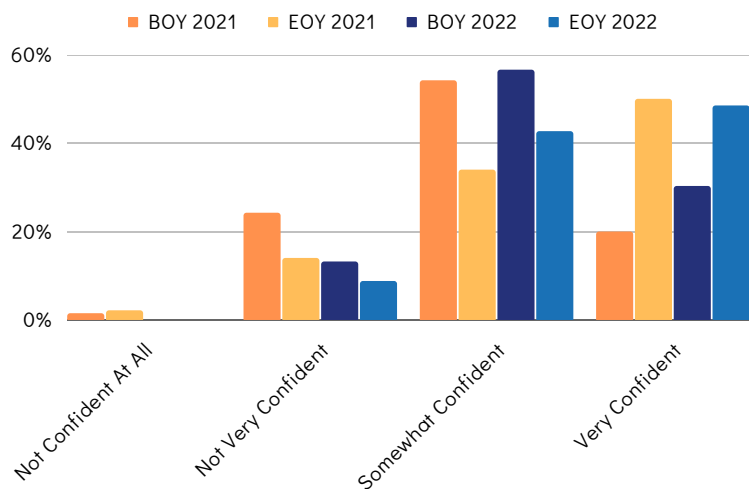


Figure 1 shows the results from 2021 and 2022 academic years for Liz's question. Both years show an increase in the number of students who feel very confident with on campus systems. First Year Experience has been able to successfully implement new programming due to results of a survey and see continued improvements.

In addition to being able to use survey results to inform programming, First Year Experience is also making several positive choices in creating survey methodology. Liz mentioned several key points in terms of methodology that can be important for increasing response rates. Castillo stated she used Survey Monkey because of "ease of use and it is so accessible." Liz also stated she tries "to make it [the surveys] short... 2 minutes." To motivate students to take the survey, Castillo gets creative in her email subject lines by using phrases such as "Tell me what you want," and "Help me help you." Short surveys and clever email subject lines are methods that can be used to get larger sample sizes, and larger sample sizes means more reliable results. Finally, when measuring growth of learning in a single group, Liz samples the same group of students. This repeated sampling process is effective as it helps increase the validity of her measures because Liz is looking at changes within the same cohort.

## Financial Literacy

If units have the ability to use tested surveys, contracted surveys can add more validity and reliability to the units' conclusions. Enida Rehome stated that Financial Literacy is designed in "Providing financial stability for our students and tools and resources that SPC has to offer to ensure that they can make sound financial decisions." Financial Literacy highlights the use of contracted surveys, which are developed with sound survey methodology based on psychometrics and repeated use, to decide which tools and resources SPC should offer to help students learn how to become financially literate, Enida works with Trellis Research to survey students on their financial wellness and awareness.

Financial Literacy provides a great example of how survey feedback can directly impact decision making, planning and thus programming. Enida Rehome actively works with her data to adjust the services provided to the college, thus directly responding to student needs. She creates a formalized feedback loop using the Trellis Survey results

Rehome described the process of surveying students as follows: "We request the data from Institutional Research of all students who are registered. Trellis sends out emails. They will send us an email for those who have not responded yet." Enida also described the need for "collaboration across the campus" in working with faculty to "speak to their students to get them to complete it." Rehome also uses incentives for increasing student response rates. Dean Rehome mentioned that SPC "raffled off backpacks" and Trellis provided "gift cards to those who completed the survey" in the most recent years.

Financial Literacy, in conjunction with other units, worked to identify the group of students they were surveying as we noticed there were large changes year to year in the total number of students. Liz, who works closely with Enida, stated, "Early on we didn't quite understand how many students we all [all ACCD colleges] share so we had bigger numbers... We began acknowledging that just trying to get SPC home students. The next evolution we didn't send it to 18 and under students." Dean Rehome has worked hard to ensure the survey that Financial Literacy sends out through Trellis is also a representative sample while trying to increase response rate.

When using the results in strategic planning and programming, Dean Rehome stated one of the most important findings she and her team have recognized from Trellis is, "There are a lot of our students [who are] struggling with emergency funds" Rehome then made the decision to make a distinction in her future programming when she was planning for the next academic year. Table 1 shows an example of what results Financial Literacy could use to determine what programming would be important for the next planning year.

Based on the results, Dean Rehome stated, "Now we really need to focus on emergencies, like what are the two differences. What is considered an emergency, what is actual savings for?"

**Table 1: Results from Trellis Survey Fall 2021**

Fall 2021 Trellis Survey Results	%
"Since January 1, 2021, approximately how many times did you use a credit card for something you didn't have money for?"	59% 4 or more times
Since January 1, 2021, approximately how many times did you run out of money?"	51% 4 or more times

Rehome decided recently to put her process into action during a Student Success' Commit to Complete event. Enida stated, "One of my topics for 'Commit to Complete' is financial stressors. When you don't have money for unexplained or unforeseen circumstances financially and what that entails, and what you should do and what steps you can take to start saving your money." Taking the results of her survey and putting the results into action, Dean Rehome helps students learn more about handling their finances.

Whether a unit creates its own survey or uses a contracted survey, measuring changes in specific concepts or programmatic offerings provides units with data-informed material to create strategic planning and innovation. Being data-informed is at the core of a culture of assessment and an important way of putting students first at SPC.

## Conclusions

The following are several key conclusions that units can make from the examples above about surveys and their use in programming and planning decisions.

1. Great effort should be put into determining your sample of students so it accurately represents student voices.
2. You can use survey results to determine which services may best serve students' needs.
3. You may desire to use a pre-test, post-test structure for surveys in order to measure progress across a planning cycle
4. Surveys are a useful tool in student facing or institution service units to measure effectiveness of services and planning.
5. There are great examples of planning across the College if you are having trouble determining metrics or ways to measure metrics who you may turn to for help.
6. Data-informed decision making is essential to measuring levels of success within your unit.

## References

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