



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## Removing Neutral: Using Student Experiences to Gather Meaningful Data in a Survey-Heavy World

*"Please complete this survey."* These dreaded four words fill up our students' inboxes after almost every experience they have in college. As a doctoral student, I'm asked to respond to a survey and share my thoughts about potential improvements after the completion of every course in my program. As a community college professional, I understand the importance of gathering data to support the improvement of campus initiatives and student success. However, at what point does obtaining feedback become meaningless? Somewhere along the way, 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree' blend together into some sort of 'neutral' zone that provides little insight. Ask any student in your class how many surveys they receive and you may be surprised. Here are examples of the surveys new students at Harper College are asked to complete:

1. After they complete orientation, students are asked to provide feedback about their experience through an in-person, written survey that times out after 20 minutes.
2. At the beginning of each First-Year Seminar (FYS) class, students receive an online pre-course survey that asks about their education experiences.
3. After the mid-point of the semester, students receive Student Opinionnaire of Instruction (SOI) surveys that gather insights into their classroom experiences. Each student may receive up to five or six SOI surveys per semester.
4. At the completion of each FYS class, students receive an online post-course survey that asks about their class experiences.

In a 16-week semester, students might receive up to nine surveys. Only one of the four above surveys allows students to provide feedback in an open-ended manner, and students are limited in the amount of time they have to complete it. Additionally, each of these surveys are emailed to students, meaning they do not have an opportunity to ask for clarification or provide other comments.

Students who attend campus events are often confronted by point-of-service surveys. At Harper College, we often ask students to complete surveys at campus events with the promise of an entry into a raffle. Colleges are likely

to have good intentions about using these data to shape future practices, but how meaningful are those data? Under the best circumstances, data may be shared and stored; but how often is the information shared with students? Further, students rarely receive direct support or acknowledgement if they voice dissatisfaction. As leaders, we must be innovative in *including* students in the data-gathering process and using the information gathered to make meaningful improvements on behalf of all students.

### How to Gather Meaningful Data (hint—it's not through a Likert scale!)

Students have the best first-hand knowledge to share with us. We know this; yet we limit their responses to 100 characters or less. Why are SOIs only shared with an instructor after the semester ends? We are so focused on anonymity that we forget students might want an opportunity to discuss their concerns. I am strongly advocating for qualitative research; I prefer stories over stats, especially when it comes to better understanding student experiences.

Here is a suggestion: Ask students directly! Whether in a FYS, biology, or math class, ask students to share their experiences in that particular environment. In the FYS classes at Harper College, we ask students to complete the following assignment:

*Harper College enrolls approximately 3,300 new students every year—about 2,600 prior to fall semester and 700 prior to spring. As students enrolled in "FYS 101: Focus on Your Future," you have had the first-hand and recent experience of enrolling in college for the first time. What was that experience like for you? What do you wish you had known then that you are more informed about now? What do you wish you had done differently? And—related to the primary purpose of this Team Project—what would you like to tell new students enrolling at Harper College next semester that will make their first semester a successful one?*

*The mission for your team is to develop and offer a presentation to the class using research and your collective wisdom about the **Top 10 Suggestions for a Successful First Year in College**. This endeavor has the potential to improve your chances for being successful in college. Your presentation may also benefit others if they choose to follow your suggestions.*

- *Communicate with your team. What do your team members consider to be the top 10 suggestions that should be included in your presentation? Discuss, collaborate, and negotiate to identify the top 10 suggestions.*
- *Survey or interview students in other classes at Harper College to discover what they consider to be important*

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success strategies. Research information through the library. What does the literature say about strategies for a successful first year in college?

- Provide support for your top 10 suggestions. Include examples, rationale, processes, and services related to your top 10 suggestions.
- Be creative! Create a booklet, develop a YouTube video, construct a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation, etc. How you choose to present your findings is up to your team.
- Create a handout to share with everyone in the class that provides relevant information about your top 10 suggestions, resources, etc.
- Tap into your team's strengths and skills. Who on your team is creative, a good listener, organized, extroverted, detail-oriented, knowledgeable about technology, etc.?

This assignment provides students with a platform to share their thoughts and experiences about a particular time in their educational cycle. Asking students to reflect on their experiences and share them in an open-ended format creates the opportunity for students to be heard. Students are encouraged to gather feedback from their peers in other classes and to work in small groups to complete the assignment.

As a community college educator teaching a FYS course, I have the education and training to support first-year students. However, do I *really know* what those students experience? I was a first-year college student too many years ago and in a different era. We need to recognize that all the research in the world cannot replicate what we can gather directly from students.

### Create Opportunities to Gather Meaningful Data in the Classroom

1. Dedicate 10 minutes at the end of each class to debrief.
2. Ask students to write a short, one-paragraph reflection every few weeks to gather information about what is and isn't working.
3. Use small group discussions to build community in the classroom and encourage the sharing of experiences.
4. Leverage your LMS platform; post a discussion board question and engage in the conversation!

### Use Meaningful Data to Support Current and Future Students

Future students will benefit from what current students share. How can you make the data-gathering process more meaningful for current students?

1. Use surveys, but make them matter. Connect with your students regularly to see how things are going. Where are they struggling? How are their experiences impacting their success? Using these techniques helps me to be a more responsive instructor. As a bonus, you can share your insights

with colleagues so they can also better support their students.

2. Create an environment where peer interaction is common in your classroom. Allow time for students to share their experiences and pay attention to those interactions. Then, use the insights to support future students in your class and to be better aware of students' needs.
3. Make the data collection process a part of your classes each semester. As our student population changes, it is likely that their experiences will change as well. Rather than relying on data gathered from past semesters, make it a point to collect fresh data on a regular basis.

Supporting and listening to our students while in the classroom provides them with an avenue to share their thoughts and experiences through open-ended opportunities where they feel their feedback is valued. Instructors need to better understand students' needs and experiences and take the time necessary to process and respond to any concerns. I encourage you to create opportunities to gather meaningful data in the classroom and use it to support your current and future students.

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