

# Considering and Creating Custom Questions

Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey | Module 2

The decision to include custom items in the Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey (FJSS) is one that requires some investment of time and resources by your team. We at COACHE know that institutional resources are limited. Beyond just the financial cost of adding custom items is the time you will spend developing items, vetting them with your team, and analyzing the results when reports arrive. Because we understand that all these resources are finite, we want you to make an informed decision about whether and how you might use custom items to get more out of your COACHE results.

This guide is designed to help you:

- Decide whether custom items are right for your institution
- Understand the parameters and limitations to custom items
- Understand our process for working with partners on the developing custom items
- Develop custom items that will provide your institution with the data you need

## Guidelines for Deciding Whether to Include Custom Items

Deciding whether or not to include custom items is an important piece of the survey administration timeline. Well thought out custom items can enhance your communication to faculty, provide you with more robust data, and help you understand your faculty better. However, a thoughtful approach is required to ensure that these additions serve your institution well.

### Review the survey instrument

Start the process by familiarizing yourself with the [Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey instrument](#). To understand where custom items might best serve your institution, you must understand what the survey already covers. Being familiar with the instrument will help you to assess the gaps and identify opportunities. If the FJSS already addresses a topic, then you will want to consider how additional items might offer you a more nuanced understanding. Then ask: are those distinctions significant enough to warrant additional items, or is the reward too small to justify your investment?

### Consider other options for obtaining the desired information

Once you have a sense of the topics that you would like to explore, the next question to consider is whether a survey is the best approach to understanding the issue. While much of COACHE's work focuses on surveys, we understand that they are not always the best methodology for gaining insight. Questions about sensitive topics might make some respondents uncomfortable (e.g. questions about incidents of sexual harassment). In other cases, faculty may not be capable of responding accurately (e.g. *how many hours per week do you spend advising graduate students?*). Still other questions can be answered by mining your own institutional data (e.g. faculty already report on the number of publications and grants), so it's not necessary to ask them to report those things again.

### Make sure your questions are faculty-specific

A final question to ask is whether the issues your institution wants to address effect other, non-faculty, groups. If your campus wants to use custom items to address an issue that also impacts students, staff, or even part-time faculty, then you need to have a plan for engaging those audiences. Ignoring them can create perceptions that faculty views on these issues are more important than other constituent groups.

## Parameters for Custom Items

To assure a smooth question development process, it is important to understand the parameters for building custom questions.

- COACHE allows up to fifteen custom items per institution. Each data point is considered its own question. Therefore Q1A, Q1B, Q1C constitutes three questions. If the question is multi-select (Check all that apply), it counts as a single item.
- All custom items are appended to the end of the survey. Before faculty begin those items, they are directed to a landing page. The landing page informs the respondent that these are institution specific items and that COACHE does not redact any identifiable information from their responses.
- Adaptive branching can be based on any variable in the population file. For example, a survey item can be asked of only pre-tenure faculty.
- Institutions can use open-text questions but COACHE does not offer redaction or qualitative analysis of those items. Open-text responses will appear in your report exactly as they were written by your faculty.

## The Custom Item Development Process

While each partner will need to develop their own local process for refining and developing custom items, COACHE is here to support you along the way. Once your institution decides to include custom items in the survey and updates your decision in the Survey Administration Portal, you will be invited to schedule a one-hour session to discuss item development with our team. Prior to that meeting, we ask that you send a list of the topics of interest.

During the session, our team will help you refine your needs, provide samples of past items, and suggest other opportunities. Your entire team does not need to be on the call but whenever possible, try to include people with a vested interest in developing these items. If your team includes a survey researcher with strong opinions, then try to have them on the call. If you are surveying a particular subgroup of faculty, make sure they have an opportunity to provide insight into the language. Engaging the right people early can create additional work up front but it also tends to create a better final product.

Based on the outcome of that meeting, COACHE will draft sample items for your team. Collectively, we will edit those items until we come to consensus. COACHE will clean and format the items



according to our programming instructions and share the final items with your institution's Team Lead who will then provide final approval and uploads a clean version of the document to the Survey Administration Portal.

## Guidance on Developing Custom Items

### Think strategically

We often describe how the survey administration process can serve as a starting point for improved relationships with your faculty. Similarly, inviting the right people into a small working group to assist you in creating custom items can foster goodwill and improve response rates and dissemination of results. The ideal team includes a diversity of expertise, an understanding of institutional climate, and, perhaps, political influence. Invite faculty or members of your IR staff with expertise in survey research. Bring faculty to the table to discuss their experiences and concerns. Consider how other players may be affected by the survey and the results. Invite representatives from faculty governance and/or the faculty collective bargaining group as a sign of your commitment to working with these constituencies.

### Think broadly

Before writing a word, think about topics in a broad sense. What themes do you wish to address? When we receive your drafts, we should be able to understand the goal of each question. One exercise that other institutions have found helpful is to ban question marks from the first planning meeting. Frame the initial conversation around the kinds of things that you hope to learn and let the questions flow after you have a clear understanding of the rationale behind them.

### Think about data analysis

Creating good survey items requires forethought into data analysis. The COACHE report of custom items will only include frequency data. If you cannot clearly describe how the data will be analyzed and reported, then consider taking a step back and revising your items. Also note that the types and quality of analysis available for open-ended ("essay response") questions is limited. Further, they tend to be more time- and labor-intensive. We only recommend open-ended questions as a means for enhancing and providing detail to existing quantitative data.

### Focus on what is actionable, avoid what is merely interesting

COACHE is committed to providing data that is actionable. When faculty answer a survey question, there is an implied notion that the administration intends to act on their responses. If your team cannot generate a list of possible policy implications for the results of each additional item, then it probably is not worth asking. Additionally, if a topic is a "sacred cow" on your campus, consider the political implications of asking the question. Is the administration steadfast in their opposition to addressing this topic? If so, will the data from a single survey item create enough compelling evidence to change that? How will the response to a single "hot topic question" impact the perceptions of the final report? Will such results become the focal point and overshadow other findings?

### Test your questions

Once your group has developed a set of custom questions, we recommend a small pilot test. Using a few colleagues from other institutions (*not* your faculty, whom you must not bias prior to survey launch) should help you to iron out any wrinkles in the language and tone of your questions. Note

that simply sending the questions out and asking faculty to take the survey is not the same as piloting the questions. Consider sending additional guiding questions as a way of understanding how your faculty thought about the questions. For example, you may want to ask your pilot participants to define some of the key concepts in the questions (e.g., “In question 1, what do you think we mean by the term ‘mentoring’?”). If they cannot answer or if they give wildly different responses, you may need to clarify your wording.

## General Tips for Designing Good Questions

- Avoid double or triple barreled questions. When an item asks respondents to respond to more than one issue in a single prompt, faculty will not know which one to respond to and your team will have difficulty analyzing the results.
- For closed response questions, make sure that the response options are exhaustive and mutually exclusive.
- For Likert scale items, make sure that the scale matches the item. Also, try to avoid placing one scale in the prompt and another in the response options. For example, rather than ask a respondent whether they agree with a statement that a policy is clear, simply use a clarity scale.
- COACHE uses five-point Likert scales for many of its survey items but it is perfectly reasonable to use a three-point or a seven-point scale. Also consider whether a mid-point is necessary or even helpful. Sometimes we want to push the respondent to pick a side. In those instances, a scale with an even number of responses might provide your team with richer data.
- Avoid leading questions and leading response sets. Stephen Colbert used to jokingly ask his talk show guests, “George Bush – Great president or greatest president?” While his prompt was tongue in cheek, we often see initial questions that appear biased. When respondents see a question that appears to be pointing them towards a particular response, it does not provide your team with useful data and can create difficulties when you share the results.
- Consider the cognitive tax on your respondents. One of the places where respondents tend to become frustrated is when a question is too difficult to answer in the moment. Take some time to honestly assess whether faculty can answer a question in the moment. If they cannot then a custom item at the end of the Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey may not be the best way capture that data.