



Deciding which data collection approach is best...

The choice of data collection methods will depend on your goals for the evaluation and the resources you have available. The table below provides a quick summary of each of the data collection methods to help you decide which approach might be best for you. Keep in mind that you might use a combination of approaches to verify information and to discover richer outcomes.

For evaluating community and library services

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus Groups	<p>Excellent approach to gather in-depth attitudes, beliefs, and anecdotal data from a large group of patrons at one time.</p> <p>Group dynamics might generate more ideas than individual interviews.</p> <p>Can be effectively used to focus on details regarding issues found through surveys or other data collection methods.</p> <p>Participants are not required to read or write. Technique relies on oral communication.</p>	<p>Requires staff time to set up and facilitate focus group.</p> <p>Requires staff time to identify and schedule participants for focus group.</p> <p>Requires strong facilitator to guide discussion and ensure participation by all members.</p> <p>Requires special equipment to record and transcribe focus group discussion.</p>
Interviews	<p>Good approach to gather information about in-depth attitudes, beliefs, and anecdotal data from individual patrons.</p> <p>Personal contact with participants might elicit richer and more detailed responses.</p> <p>Provides an excellent opportunity to probe and explore questions.</p> <p>Participants do not need to be able to read and write to respond.</p>	<p>Requires staff time and quiet area to conduct interviews.</p> <p>Requires special equipment to record and transcribe interviews.</p>
Observation	<p>Excellent approach to discover behaviors during library programs.</p>	<p>Requires staff time to observe and record observations.</p>

Surveys

Might provide more reliable indicators of the impact of programs than by asking people.

Good technique when there are observable products and outcomes.

Best for gathering brief written responses on attitudes, beliefs regarding library programs.

Can include both close-ended and open-ended questions.

Can be administered in written form or online.

Personal contact with the participants is not required.

Staff and facilities requirements are minimal, since one employee can easily manage the distribution and collection of surveys, and issues such as privacy, quiet areas, etc. are typically not concerns.

Cannot ask questions of participants during observation.

Might want to use follow-up interviews to verify observations.

Responses are limited to the questions included in the survey.

Participants need to be able to read and write to respond.

Takes time to pre-test a written survey to make sure that your questions are clearly stated.

Relies on participants' perceptions. Be aware of potential gaps between participants' responses and reality.

Surveys work better after you have determined the range of outcomes that the survey can target. Therefore, surveys may not be the best initial data collection tool.

Questions on surveys can be misunderstood, especially if they are self-administered and/or if participants do not understand the context for the survey questions.

Survey questions (especially closed-ended questions) can be limited to what the provider thinks may be the range of responses.

Follow-up Interviews

Good method to follow-up on patrons' feelings and experiences that were shared earlier using another approach, such as a survey.

Requires staff time to administer follow-up interviews.

Must have gathered contact information in the initial data collection process.

Requires special equipment to record and transcribe interviews.

Credit: October 2005 / Prepared by Sara Behrman from information derived from The Library Toolkit, School of Information, University of Michigan