

Get to know your students via a start-of-semester survey

Why use a start-of-semester survey?

Start-of-semester surveys are an excellent way to build trust and community with your students, while personalizing the support you provide them.

Start-of-semester surveys can be used to learn about your students' motivations for taking your course, as well as how they hope this course will prepare them to achieve longer-term academic, professional, and personal goals. In turn, knowing more about your students empowers you to use this information to increase the relevance of your course to your students' own interests, goals, experiences, communities, cultures, and identities. Increasing the relevance of your course is associated with greater student motivation and learning. It is also a pillar of equity-minded and inclusive teaching (see the Norton Guide to Equity-minded Teaching <https://seagull.wwnorton.com/equityguide>).

Start-of-semester surveys can also be used to begin building community and a sense of support. For example, consider addressing common concerns students expressed in their survey responses in class (or asynchronously, e.g., via a discussion board), pairing each concern with tips for success and an overview of resources in place to support students when they are struggling. Addressing common concerns helps students feel more connected with their peers, fosters a growth mindset, and shows that you are invested in students' success.

Considerations before administering a start-of-semester survey

We recommend administering start-of-semester surveys within the first week or so of class. We generally do not recommend assigning any work *before* the start of the semester, given that students may have full-time jobs or other commitments. With that said, we recognize there are exceptions; for example, students may need to complete some pre-work in preparation for a study abroad program.

Consider the following before deciding whether and how to use a start-of-semester survey in your own courses:

- Start-of-semester surveys are entirely optional; they are not required by CU.

- We encourage you to tailor the sample questions provided below to your specific course context. For example, in large-enrollment courses, you may wish to replace open-ended questions with multiple choice or check all that apply-style questions to make data processing and interpretation more manageable.
- If you are already using an “introduce yourself” discussion or other icebreaker activity in your course, a start-of-semester survey may be redundant with that activity.
- Additionally, note that students may use NameCoach in Canvas to record how to pronounce their name and add the pronouns they use. [Learn more about NameCoach from OIT.](#)
- Decide in advance whether you will give students any credit or points for completing this survey, and be sure to communicate this to your students. If you plan to give students credit or points for completing the survey, make sure you have a way of tracking who has completed it (note that this is straightforward if you are using a [survey in Canvas](#)).
- Consider whether you want to collect students' identifying information in this survey or make the survey anonymous. Be sure to communicate this clearly to your students.

Sample start-of-semester survey

Below, we have provided a sample start-of-semester survey, set up as a Google Form. You are welcome to modify this sample survey, or you can use it as a model for building a survey in another survey platform (e.g., Canvas surveys, Qualtrics). [Read more about how to create surveys in Canvas.](#)

Click this link to create your own editable copy of a sample start-of-semester survey in Google Forms:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1AebPvth5NtFR_oJ-rGmGxsm6-Dyg4JpBOaHOeYtDI18/copy

In case you prefer to use a different survey platform (e.g., Canvas surveys, Qualtrics), here is the content from the sample start-of-semester survey linked above:

Welcome to [course name]! This start-of-semester survey is intended to help us begin getting to know you, your interests and goals, and any needs or concerns you may have. This survey is [anonymous/not anonymous, and explain what this means]. This survey consists of [number] of questions and should take no more than [number] minutes to complete. You are welcome to skip any questions you are not comfortable responding to (all questions are optional). Thanks, and please contact [instructor] if you have any questions!

Why are you taking this course? Please check all that apply.
 It's required for my major or minor.
 I'm interested in the subject matter.

It's the only course I could get into or that fit in my schedule.
It will help me gain skills and knowledge needed for my future career.
It will help me gain skills and knowledge needed for graduate school or a professional program (e.g., medical or law school).
Other [Please write in your response]

What are you hoping to learn or gain (knowledge, skills, experiences, etc.) through this course?

Is there anything about yourself, including your identities, background, etc., that you would like to share to help us get to know you?

Do you have any learning needs you would like to share?

Do you have any concerns you would like to share?

[cut this question if survey is anonymous] What would you like us to call you in this class? Please include your name and, if you would like to share them, your pronouns. Example: Jane Smith (they/them).

Additional examples of start-of-semester survey items

What do you think will be most challenging for you in this course? **[Replace answer options with options appropriate to your course, and share tips for success with your students.]**

- a. Staying on top of the readings
- b. Memorizing a lot of new concepts
- c. Understanding complex biological mechanisms
- d. Writing a research paper
- e. [Etc...]

What topic are you most excited to learn about? **[Replace answer options with major units or topics you will cover in your course.]**

- a. Learning and memory
- b. Sensation and perception
- c. Motivation and emotion
- d. [Etc...]