

# **GUIDELINES FOR PROSPECTIVE GSS MODULE PROPOSALS**

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This memorandum outlines the general procedures through which new questions are included on a General Social Survey (GSS) instrument. This memo is intended to serve as a general guide for different types of new content development.

## **General Background to the GSS**

The General Social Survey is a nationally representative face-to-face survey of non-institutionalized adults, funded by the National Science Foundation and other sources and collected by NORC. It is fielded every two years and made available to the public as soon as possible thereafter (typically six months after data collection ends).

The survey targets a sample of 3000 respondents. The survey is actually two 1500 respondent surveys fielded at the same time. There is a demographic core set of questions (asked of all 3000), a substantive core (usually one on each of the 1500 sub-samples), modules that bring new material to the project (approximately 45 minutes of questions on each sub-survey), and two 15 minute modules from the International Social Survey Project (ISSP) (one on each sub-survey). The new content of the survey (in the approximately 45 minute module segment) is determined by the GSS Board of Overseers, in consultation with the GSS Principal Investigators and NORC.

The NSF grant that funds the core GSS survey covers only a part of the costs of data collection. New material must be funded by other sources (e.g., grants from foundations or government agencies) or have potential for such funding. Researchers interested in developing new content should contact Tom W. Smith, the Director of the GSS at NORC ([smitht@norc.uchicago.edu](mailto:smitht@norc.uchicago.edu); phone 773-256-6288), to discuss ideas and to obtain information about the costs (per minute) of survey time, time estimates for potential questions, and availability of space on a given year's survey. NORC can provide a cost estimate and preliminary approval (subject to availability of funding and space) for the purposes of submitting proposals to funding agencies.

## **Advantages of GSS as a Vehicle for Data Collection**

The General Social Survey represents a very high quality data collection effort. The GSS maintains a high response rate, averaging 70-75% over the last decade, much higher than the average response rate of surveys in general (see a more detailed analysis in Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2003). As one of the few remaining surveys with face-to-face interviews, the GSS avoids problems of coverage that are inherent in the less expensive telephone surveys. The sampling frame, interviewer training and management of data collection are all exemplary.

Most advantageous, however, is the opportunity to link one's questions to the large amount of other information that is collected in each GSS survey. Very thorough basic demographic information is collected on all respondents, as are a wide variety of attitudes,

opinions and behavioral items (visit the web site at [www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss) for examples). In addition, modules are often placed together on a survey in ways that provide synergistic information. The GSS Board and PIs attempt to design each survey to provide the most useful substantive information to all researchers who have proposed content. Therefore, a small set of items placed on the GSS will be administered with other items measured over an hour's interview time, covering a wide range of issues, all of which are available to researchers in a timely manner in a usable, clean data set. Most of the infrastructure cost of making the data available to other researchers (e.g., at the end of a federally funded project) is accomplished with no additional effort on the researcher's part.

If questions require extensive post-interview processing, investigators need to provide funding for that additional work. The GSS has a preference for projects that allow release of data to the general scholarly user community in a timely manner, but arrangements vary from project to project. Again, consultation with the Project Director Tom W. Smith and the GSS Board will provide useful guidance about the appropriate range of possible arrangements.

### **Proposals for New Content**

After preliminary discussions with Tom W. Smith, proposals for new content can be submitted to either the Director of the GSS (Smith), one of the Principal Investigators, or to the Chair of the GSS Board. Proposals may suggest content of varying length, from a single question to survey instruments of 15 minutes (or, in very rare instances, longer instruments). Proposals may include specific items, suggestions of types of items and their conceptual basis, or general topics. New content should propose to collect data from either one of the 1500 respondent surveys or from all 3000 respondents.

### **Criteria for Choosing Content**

The GSS attempts to provide high quality data in a timely manner to a large user community. The GSS Board and PIs employ the following criteria in developing and encouraging new content for the GSS.

1. New content is of high scientific quality, appropriate to the GSS, and justified on theoretical or methodological grounds.
2. New content is useful to a wide range of users (e.g., researchers, teachers, policymakers, etc.) and enhances the usefulness of core GSS items, previously collected GSS data (e.g., in time series analysis), or data from other sources (e.g., to be used for comparisons).
3. New content must meet basic human subjects protections, in compliance with the overall project's IRB approval, NSF and NORC policies.
4. New content must fit within the overall time framework of the survey and must not interfere to a substantial degree with respondent cooperation and the integrity of responses to questions later in the survey.

Generally, questions on the GSS are fixed choice survey items that are asked in a face-to-face context. Other formats are also possible (e.g., open ended, card sort, unusual stimulus materials) but they often increase time, complexity and cost. Such cases must serve some important scientific purpose (and typically be funded by other sources) to justify the additional effort required.

### **Time Line for Proposals**

Proposals for new material can come to the GSS Board and PIs at any time. However, there is significant lead time necessary to include new material on a GSS survey. The GSS is fielded currently in even-numbered years (2004, 2006, etc.). The GSS Board meets twice a year, in March/April and in September/October. Survey content is typically finalized the fall before a survey goes into the field. Any item that has not been used in a previous GSS or other similar survey must be pretested the previous summer to establish accurate timing and to resolve any measurement or substantive issues. Preliminary proposals should come to the GSS Board in the fall, two years before the proposed data collection (e.g. fall 2006 for the 2008 GSS). Finalized questionnaire items must be submitted before the spring GSS Board meeting in the year before the survey (e.g. spring 2007 for the 2008 GSS). In practice, a longer lead time is desirable to allow for collaboration and development with Board members, PIs and NORC and to arrange for funding. Practically speaking, funding must be highly probable a year in advance of a survey for items to be included in the pretest; funding must be finalized early in the fall before a survey goes into the field, at the very latest. Since time is allocated on a first-come, first-included basis for modules with substantively important, appropriate content, earlier funding and questionnaire development are desirable.

### **Proposal Development**

Proposals can come to the Board and PIs at many stages of development, ranging from fully funded questionnaires in almost final form to a general idea for a theoretically important topic that is well suited to the GSS's mission. A proposal, 2-5 pages in length, should briefly:

- Discuss the background and the scientific, theoretical, or methodological motivation for inclusion of the topic in the GSS;
- Discuss the specific topics, items, or questions to be included in the GSS;
- Comment on the history of inclusion of the topic/items in the GSS or other data collections;
- Discuss the appropriateness of the GSS for the proposed data collection;
- Provide an indication of potential funding sources. If a proposal is planned or has been submitted, provide the (expected) proposal submission and review dates, and an estimate of the amount requested for data collection.

If a proposal for funding has already been prepared and submitted to a funding agency, the text of the proposal may be included as an Appendix to the proposal to the GSS Board.

Typically, the Board and PIs will review a proposal to assess its suitability for the GSS mission and format, and report back to the researcher with a general sense of the project's potential for inclusion on a future GSS. At that point, several levels of collaboration can ensue (arrayed from the most collaborative to the least extensive):

1. The GSS Board could work with the researcher to form a module-development committee around a general topic or idea. The committee might hold various meetings, workshops or other collaborative conferences to develop the theoretical ideas, write survey items that will generate meaningful evidence, and explore funding possibilities.

2. The Board might suggest that one or more of its members (perhaps in collaboration with outside scholars) work with the researcher and the GSS PIs to further develop ideas and items.

3. The GSS PIs might work with the researcher to modify their items to better suit the GSS format and mission.

4. The researcher may simply receive encouragement for an appropriate, important and fully developed idea.

In general, the GSS Board and PIs hope to act as useful consultants for shaping projects in a way that will make them more likely to be included in the survey and more likely to be useful both to the original proposer and the larger user community. It is rare for a proposal to proceed to data collection without some input from the Board and PIs.

Since there is limited time available on any given survey instrument, the final approval can typically not be given for a set of items to appear on the GSS instrument until relatively late in this process (often the fall meeting before a survey goes into the field). Therefore, much of the process described above must occur before a proposal is assured of space on the survey. The GSS Board attempts to give accurate feedback about the potential of an idea for inclusion at different stages of the process, but the uncertainty of funding for several new content modules that are being developed simultaneously makes firm commitments unlikely until the fall meeting before the survey is fielded. However, Tom W. Smith of NORC can provide a letter stating a project's general acceptability and potential cost for inclusion in grant proposals. While such a letter does not represent a binding commitment to include the material in the survey, it is rare for a scientifically sound, funded module of new material that is appropriate to the GSS mission and format to not be included.

## **Reference**

Davis, James, Tom W. Smith, and Peter Marsden. 2003. *General Social Survey, 1972-2002: Cumulative Codebook*. Chicago: NORC, 2003.