Some Methods of Data Collection

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus Groups	Excellent approach to gather in-depth attitudes, beliefs, and anecdotal data from a large group of patrons at one time. Group dynamics might generate more ideas than individual interviews. Can be effectively used to focus on details regarding issues found through surveys or other data collection methods. Participants are not required to read or write. Technique relies on oral communication.	Requires staff time to set up and facilitate focus group. Requires staff time to identify and schedule participants for focus group. Requires strong facilitator to guide discussion and ensure participation by all members. Usually requires special equipment to record and transcribe focus group discussion.
Interviews	Good approach to gather in-depth attitudes, beliefs, and anecdotal data from individual patrons. Personal contact with participants might elicit richer and more detailed responses. Provides an excellent opportunity to probe and explore questions. Participants do not need to be able to read and write to respond.	Requires staff time and quiet area to conduct interviews. Requires special equipment to record and transcribe interviews.
Observation	Excellent approach to discover behaviors Provides indicators of the impact of programs that might be more reliable than data gained by asking people. Good technique when there are observable products and outcomes.	Requires staff time to observe and record observations. Cannot ask questions of participants during observation. Might want to use follow-up interviews to verify observations.

Source: "Collecting Data: Deciding Which Approach Is Best." In: *Tools and Resources: Outcome Toolkit*. Seattle: University of Washington IBEC (Information Behavior in Everyday Contexts). <http://ibec.ischool.washington.edu/toolkitstep2a.php>

| Surveys | 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. | 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 users' feelings and experiences that were shared earlier using another approach, such as a survey.

Provides an excellent opportunity to probe and explore with questions

Participants do not need to be able to read and write to respond

Can be face-to-face or via phone or online | Requires staff time to administer follow-up interviews.

Contact information must be gathered in the initial data collection process.

Requires special equipment to record and transcribe interviews. |

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