

# Sampling Techniques for Assessing Course-Level SLOs



From the Desk of Joan Sholars, SLO Coordinator

A repeated question asked is, “Do we have to sample every section of a course when we are assessing our SLOs?” The quick answer is “no.” You can do a sample, but, of course, you would like the sample to be as representative of the population as possible. You may wish to make an inference about the population on the basis of characteristics of the sample. So, now the question becomes, “How can we get a representative sample?”

The best way to get a representative sample is to make your sample as random as possible. What does random mean? Here is a good example — from 10 sections, you can sample 4 of them. Give each section a number from 1 to 10 and write the numbers on a piece of paper. Put the pieces of paper in a jar. Shake the jar up. Reach in and choose 4 different pieces of paper. Voila! You have randomly decided which four sections to sample.

For some of you, deciding what to sample could be a challenge, at least at first. There are other considerations involved in the sampling, such as sections taught by part-time faculty. You and your department must decide if you want to involve part-time faculty in the process at first. Eventually, you will want all faculty involved.

Let’s say that there are 10 sections of the course that you want to assess. What size would make a good sample? Start with a sample size of 75 (assuming there are 300 students in the 10 sections). A rule of thumb for sampling size is to sample about 25% of the total number of students. Of course, the larger the sample size, the more relevant your data should be. How many sections would you need to sample to get about 75 responses? Now, how do we choose those sections?

Before you decide which and how many sections you want to sample, decide what is it that you are trying to learn. Do you think that day students are different from evening students? Do you think that students who meet with you more than once a week are different than students who only meet with the instructor once a week? Do you want to sample only sections taught by full-time faculty? The answers to these questions can guide you as to how you want to sample.

For example, let’s say that you have decided to divide your population of students into day students and night students. Try sampling a section from each day and night group. Suppose there are 10 day sections and 10 night sections of the course that you are assessing, and you have decided that you need to sample 4 sections to get approximately 75 students. Then randomly choose 2 day sections and 2 night sections.

Or you might look at the number of days these sections are taught. Do you have some that are taught only once a week, whereas some are taught two or three times during the week? You might try sampling a section from the different ways the class is taught. Divide the population of students into how many days the sections are taught: once a week, twice a week, three or more times a week. Then randomly choose some sections from each group.

The course-level SLOs have been written. It has been decided how to sample the different sections of the course. Now, the question is, “How often do I need to assess?”

The decision should be made by the faculty in the department. To get relevant data -- to make the process meaningful -- should you assess the same course over more than one semester? Do you think that there is a difference between the students you see in the regular semesters versus the students you see in the summer or winter intersession? Do you think there is a difference between the students you see in the fall and the ones you see in the spring? If so, then assessing for more than one semester might be worthwhile.

Remember, if you have any questions, feel free to contact me at Extension.4610 or [jsholars@mtsac.edu](mailto:jsholars@mtsac.edu). I will be happy to help you.

**NOTE:** This paper is aimed for people with little statistical background. For more statistically-driven and structured sampling methods, please contact the Research and Institutional Effectiveness Office. Additional information can be found at <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/sampling.php> or <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm#sneeded>.