

Mississippi Association of Community Colleges
Council for Institutional Research & Effectiveness
External Research Sub-Committee
Suggestions for External Researchers

Following are suggestions for external researchers desiring to perform research within the MACC. These are not policy items or rigidly binding, but do reflect the experience of sub-committee members gleaned from the review and consideration of research applications over a number of years.

1. Propose topics and research questions that readily relate to tangible local needs and priorities of Mississippi community colleges, particularly in the areas of teaching and learning, student success, and resource planning. Colleges will be more apt to participate if research results apply to real and identifiable questions or issues, and if the research can clearly help the colleges improve.
2. Remember that most colleges guard against survey fatigue among faculty and students, in the interest of maximizing responses to local requests for information. Keep this in mind if the primary method of data collection is anticipated to be survey-based. Colleges will tend to limit the number of external surveys/questionnaires distributed in an academic year.
3. Maximize public data resources, such as the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), the Mississippi Community College Performance Profile, etc. Colleges spend significant time submitting data to these public data systems and will appreciate researchers that avail themselves to them.
4. Avoid, to the greatest extent possible, unnecessarily inflammatory, emotional, combative, politically charged, or divisive topics. Often, such subjects may not have immediate applicability to local college improvement initiatives. Also, if a college intends to delve into such content, expert contracted assistance will typically be sought as opposed to relying on, for example, a doctoral dissertation. Be realistic. Colleges will assess risk and reward in considering participation. If there is material risk that, for example, results from qualitative research interview questions could turn problematic or create a public relations issue, the college is likely to decline.
5. Incorporate quantitative research methods whenever possible. Generally, raw data is more directly made de-identifiable, does not carry the social risks of open-ended qualitative research, and does not exacerbate survey fatigue on campus.

6. Frame research questions in such a way as to communicate a comfort level that the college will not be identifiable and will not be compared to other colleges or cohorts in a way that may publicly reflect negatively on the institution. Certainly, research should render areas and possibly recommendations for improvement, but be mindful of protecting the institution's public reputation. Again – the college will consider risk versus reward. The same is true for the MACC system as a whole.
7. Make data collection as easy and straightforward as possible for the participating college. For example, if the instrument is a survey, design the questionnaire in an easily linkable electronic format. If the request is for a data extraction, provide the college with well thought-out data definitions and table layouts.
8. Avoid interrupting classroom instruction time as much as possible. Best case, completely avoid infringing upon class time. Colleges will generally be hesitant to turn instructional time over to an external researcher. If observation is a research technique, provide assurance that such observation will be unobtrusive.
9. Be conscious of sensitive information and information protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). For example, colleges will tend to be hesitant to release student record level grade information, even if apparently de-identified. Anticipate ways in which supposedly anonymous student data could be identifiable. As one case in point, Mississippi community colleges are divided into districts – thus, if student names in a data set are redacted but home towns are included, it could be apparent to readers of the research which community college is referenced. Think through these types of questions beforehand. Provide for a high confidence level within the application pertaining to data security and participant anonymity.
10. Be succinct and to-the-point in the application for external research. Communicate what is needed, but avoid extraneous explanations related to the research. Remember, the sub-committee does not function as an advisor or as an IRB; it is simply attempting to discern the appropriateness for release to the colleges indicated for participation. Final decisions on participation will be made by each institution. Include all of the salient information in the text of the application – avoid referencing attachments, which makes it more difficult for sub-committee members to cohesively discern the main points of the application. Also, write the application well – avoid grammatical, sentence structure, and spelling mistakes, etc. For most of the voting sub-committee members, the only connection with the researcher, and gauge of competence, may be the application itself.