

# SURVEY AS TEAMBUILDER

*By Kate Plows*

**T**wo years ago, when a couple of brilliant student editors first proposed running a survey of the incoming freshman class, I was a bit hesitant. Our extracurricular staff does not have many concentrated opportunities for rigorous training throughout the year, so our two-day back-to-school workshop in August fills a major need.

With a mostly brand-new team, I knew we needed time on the basics, time to learn, time to plan, and time to build trust and relationships. Where would we find time to add the logistics of survey design and implementation — all new to our staff?

Wise student leaders have taught me never to stand in the way of motivated editors. When I voiced my concerns, they assured me that they would make the time, and simply requested that I bring my design teaching skills to help them bring their ideas from concept to print. What ensued turned into a remarkable way to build editors' confidence in their

roles and in the team, as well as a practical way to teach data analysis and infographic design before day one of the school year. Even better, the freshman survey boosted the publication's visibility and recognition with the freshman class and helped us to recruit several new members.

## PLANNING AND LOGISTICS

Our school hosts freshmen on campus in late August prior to the start of the school year for orientation, so the first step in creating a freshman survey was locking in a slot on the orientation schedule where we would have easy access to as many freshmen as possible. It was important to the editors to survey the students face-to-face rather than online. They wanted to meet new students, and explain how the survey data would be used; additionally, most incoming freshmen would not be actively checking their email until the start of the school year.

For us, this time slot was during a morning book sale on campus. Half of the freshman class

reported the first morning, and half the second morning. The editors met with the faculty orientation committee in May, presented the survey idea, and locked this slot in on the schedule.

Another idea emerged out of the discussion with the faculty orientation committee: Would the editors be interested in sharing the results of the survey live and in person with the freshman class, at a brief assembly closing out orientation on the second day? Our press date for the first issue of the year was not until mid-September, but this proposal meant having presentation-worthy data to share on the same day that the survey closed. This created pressure to analyze data and design infographics while the information was still hot off the survey. Without fully understanding the challenge — or so I thought — the editors agreed.

From there, it was a matter of working backward to the date.

During the summer, the staff's

core leadership team—for us, the Editors-in-Chief, Managing Editors, and Chief Investigative Reporter—collaborated on a shared document to develop their list of survey questions. This was a free-flowing and wide-ranging brainstorm at first, with some fantastic questions. The EICs began sorting the questions into general categories—demographics, academics, sports and activities, and culture. They argued about the questions in comments and feedback on that document, and occasionally sought my feedback. By early August, they had the survey organized and narrowed down to 39 questions.

They also discussed survey platform. Google Forms seemed like the easiest option, since our students were familiar with the Google platform and felt comfortable designing questions on the interface. Yet they knew they wanted to keep the survey anonymous, and senior editors raised the concern that even if they survey did not request a login, some students might be hesitant to share responses to sensitive questions in a familiar Google interface.

They tested out and eventually decided on SurveyMonkey. We invested in a paid account and

have used it for several surveys since then. Editors then began designing and testing questions in the SurveyMonkey platform. Once they built the survey, they completed numerous tests and figured out the expected survey duration: most students could complete the 39 questions in three to five minutes — a crucial



benchmark they determined was necessary to get student participation. It was a challenge to test out infographic creators before we had data. Our Managing Editors tried out a few options over the summer and decided on Infogram, although Piktochart and other options also work well. When it came to production time, they ended up using a combination of Infogram and Photoshop to get

the desired effects.

I helped the editors to reserve a set of classroom laptops for survey administration from our technology staff, and to ensure that tables would be ready at the survey location. A smart Managing Editor decided to create a print version of the survey, just in case the wireless was slow or out at implementation. Although the wireless worked fine on the survey date, we were able to use these print copies to share the list of questions with curious teachers and administrators who visited our tables. With all the pieces in place, the last logistical plan involved incentive: they decided to order some rubber bracelets printed with 'Class of 2019' and our publication website, and enough candy to feed the freshman class.

With only a little coaching from the adviser, a motivated team prepared all of the logistics prior to our August workshop so they were able to focus on training.

### TEAMBUILDING

The implementation and design of the survey served as a jump-start for the core leadership team to dive into their new roles. The

team would only have about three hours on the closing day of the survey to prepare infographics and a presentation for the freshman class. The EICs organized the whole process and took the lead on editing the questions and possible multiple choice responses. Managing Editors had to practice before the date of the survey so they had an idea of how they would create the infographics quickly and efficiently. They recruited a couple of other student designers to help.

At the survey implementation, the team members wore their staff shirts and brought enthusiasm. They introduced themselves to each freshman and explained the survey, especially focusing on the anonymity. Although most of the questions were basic and even fun, the EICs had included a few questions about alcohol and drug use. For the survey to be accurate, students needed to feel it was OK to be honest, without fear of school consequences. With five student leaders working the survey table for the whole morning, plus section editors and other staff dropping by to help, it never became too busy or chaotic. Each freshman received a bracelet and dove into the candy bowl when he completed his survey. When the survey was complete,

nearly 90 percent of the freshman class had responded.

We ordered pizza for lunch after the morning administration was complete on the second day, and the team got to work on preparing the data and presentation. First, during lunch, the staff sifted through the questions and responses to look for highlights and newsworthy points. SurveyMonkey's interface allowed us to efficiently review the data and to identify the basics, like hometown, background, and reasons for coming to the school, as well as a few surprises that would be fun to share at the presentation. They decided on 15 questions for the presentation and 24 questions to publish online and in the September issue.

Then the team began work with creating the content. Managing Editors and designers worked on creating the infographics, including pie charts, bar graphs, and stylized word maps, while EICs and the Chief Investigative Reporter drafted commentary. Every editor had to depend on each other to do his part. Infographics couldn't be created without concise, organized data; commentary depended on clear, interesting graphics that told a story. Especially as the scheduled

presentation approached, the team felt a concentrated version of the deadline pressure they would face for a monthly print newspaper for the rest of the year. Yet with all of the preparation in advance, the process was both intense and fun.

"The teamwork is a lot less stressful than most that we handle on staff, which is quite a relief and a great way to ease back into the swing of things," according to Managing Editor Ethan Rowley, who has been involved with the survey for two years and is preparing for year three. "It's a pretty good way to further pull together a group that's going to spend the next seven or eight months working pretty intensively together on a continuous basis."

#### **SHARING RESULTS AND LEADERSHIP**

At the freshman orientation presentation, the core leadership team shared results on stage in front of the freshman class and teachers only a few hours after the survey was completed. They opened their slideshow by introducing The Blackfriar Chronicle, our website, and our social media channels. Freshmen followed the publication on Twitter from the audience, and a few shared comments as the presentation unfolded.

EICs led the presentation with smart and sometimes witty commentary. Freshmen laughed and cheered as they learned about who they were as a class. At the end of the presentation, the staff got a standing ovation. They told freshmen to look for the full results of the survey in the September issue. They shared information about how freshmen could get involved on our extracurricular staff. After this presentation, freshmen recognized our core leadership team of upperclassmen around campus. They also got their first glimpse of what real student leadership at the school looks like. Several freshmen who joined staff each year have cited the visibility of the freshman survey as one of the reasons they decided to get involved.

After the presentation, the staff debriefed and started planning for print layout, which felt easier with many of the graphics and commentary already complete. They also wrote down suggestions for next year while the process was still fresh in everyone's minds. This debrief file included new questions, process notes (for instance, make sure the computer screens are facing away from the open area of the book sale so curious parents can't read student responses over their shoulders, resulting in less

honest answers) and enhancement ideas.

In year two, the editors were able to draw comparisons to the previous year's data without inferring trends. One class might just be different from another—for instance, the fact that the Class of 2020 identified as an inch shorter than the Class of 2019 is not yet a trend. They have decided to keep a core list of about 25 questions consistent from year-to-year, so we can hopefully draw some trends in the future. They also decided to add some extra features to the print edition of the survey, like suggestions for campus life, and to write the staff editorial in the September issue addressed to the freshman class. Alumni editors have helped to coach the new team on the survey each year.

A program about which I was initially skeptical about has turned into an important teambuilder, as well as an anticipated feature of freshman orientation and in our first issue of the year. The freshman survey inspires curiosity, builds relationships, and helps our team to publicly identify as journalists and student leaders as they move into the new school year.

"My favorite part of the survey is being able to learn a great deal about the incoming class before

anyone else does," Rowley said.

"The survey as a whole always is a great eye-opener that the people who comprise Malvern are much more varied than what we may initially believe."

By launching our year with the freshman survey, we learned a lot about the incoming class, but perhaps even more about our staff dynamics as a team, and what it would be like to work together for the rest of the year.



**KATE PLOWS**

Kate Plows advises The Friar's Lantern newspaper and website at Malvern Preparatory School in Malvern, Pennsylvania, where she also teaches graphic design and ceramics. Her students won Pennsylvania Student Journalist of the Year in 2016 and 2017, the 2016 JEA Impact Award, 2017 JEA Aspiring Young Journalist, and other state and national recognition. Kate is the 2017-2018 Pennsylvania School Press Association Journalism Teacher of the Year.