

## GUIDELINES FOR PAID SUPPLEMENTS TO THE GSS

The General Social Survey (GSS) project regularly includes topical modules developed by investigators and research groups in the user community, supported by investigator-raised funds from outside the GSS budget. Between 1998 and 2006, all GSS topical modules were externally funded in this manner. While the GSS will consider proposals from users for some project-supported topical modules (see the *Call for Proposals to Add Questions to the 2018 GSS* posted at <http://gss.norc.org>), the project will continue to seek and include externally-funded topical modules as well. This document sets out guidelines for developing such “paid supplements” to the GSS, making proposals for such supplements, and the processes for developing them in interaction with the GSS Principal Investigators and Board of Overseers.

The GSS is a nationally representative survey of non-institutionalized adults in the United States, conducted primarily via face-to-face interviews. A National Science Foundation (NSF) grant provides foundational support for the GSS, but does not cover all costs of data collection; other sources provide supplementary support, typically for the costs of fielding topical modules. GSS data are collected every two years (2014, 2016, etc.), and made available to the research community and the public as soon as possible after data collection is complete. For additional information about the GSS and its study design, please consult the official NORC/GSS website at <http://gss.norc.org>.

The GSS strives to collect social survey data of very high quality. Its response rates are extremely high by comparison with surveys in general, above 70% (see [Appendix A](#) for details). As a face-to-face mode survey, it avoids the coverage problems inherent in telephone surveys. NORC maintains a highly current area probability sampling frame based mainly on US Postal Service Delivery Sequence File listings. It invests heavily in interviewer training, and in supervision and management of the data collection process.

A major advantage of the GSS as a vehicle for data collection for topical modules is the large amount of other information collected in each GSS. The survey assembles unusually rich demographic information on all respondents, together with data on a “replicating core” of items measuring a wide variety of attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (see [Replicating Core](#) for the set of items measured in each GSS). Further synergies are often generated by administering modules on related topics to the same respondents. Investigators who place a small number of items on the GSS will be able to contextualize them using other items covering a broad set of issues, measured during more than an hour of interview time. The data are made available to researchers in a timely manner after a careful set of consistency checks, other cleaning, and documentation. Most of the infrastructural tasks of preparing data so that they can be disseminated to other researchers (as required of federally funded projects, for example) are accomplished as part of data preparation and require no additional efforts on the investigator’s part.

### Developing Proposals for Paid Supplements

Proposals for paid supplements may be initiated at any time. Investigators interested in submitting proposals for outside-funded items should contact Tom W. Smith, the Principal Investigator and Director of the GSS at NORC ([smitht@norc.uchicago.edu](mailto:smitht@norc.uchicago.edu); phone 773-256-6288.) This initial consultation will provide, among many other things, a rough estimate of the field costs entailed by the scope of work envisioned (which are based on the per-minute costs of interviewing and data processing)

Proposals for supplements may suggest content of varying length—as short as a single survey question, or as long as a topical module involving a series of interrelated items as long as 15 minutes

(or, in rare instances, even longer instruments). Initial proposals may include specific items, suggestions of types of items and their conceptual basis, or only general topics to be investigated; the less specific the proposed items, however, the longer the development sequence that will likely be required before the items can appear in a GSS. Investigators should consider how large a sample size they require to investigate the ideas of interest to them (some topical modules are administered to the full GSS sample; others are asked of some randomly selected subset of respondents), whether the questions need to be asked only of some well-defined subset of respondents (e.g. married persons, currently employed persons, persons who have attended religious services within the past year), and whether they wish to administer their items within one annual GSS cross-section (e.g. in 2018) or to obtain repeated observations in consecutive GSSs (in, for example, 2018, 2020, and 2022). Investigators proposing multi-year content should address the value of having trend data on the proposed items. Proposals for survey experiments that administer alternative question wordings (or other manipulations of survey protocols) to randomly designated subsets of respondents are also welcome; such experiments may address substantive social science questions, issues of survey methodology, or both.

Proposals should articulate the scientific objectives that would be met if the proposed items were to be added to the GSS and the specific research questions that the investigator would seek to address using them. Ideally, proposals will include the specific wording of survey items, available evidence of their past use and performance in other surveys, and evidence bearing on the quality of data (validity, reliability, item nonresponse, etc.) they elicit. Demonstrating that items have proved fruitful in past published work, or that their inclusion would contribute to better understanding in key social science domains, can strengthen all proposals. Items having synergies with existing GSS content and are of interest to GSS users, over and beyond addressing the research questions posed by a proposal's investigators, are of particular interest to the GSS Board and PIs. Proposals for supplements should indicate the source of funding that will support field costs (if already secured), or the status (e.g. in preparation, under consideration) of proposals to obtain such funding.

Usually, 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., self-administered items, open-ended items, card sort tasks, or stimulus materials provided via audio or video) but such variations often increase time, complexity and cost (coding costs are substantial for open-ended items, for example). Hence, items with such formats must serve an important scientific purpose, and typically require additional funding beyond basic interviewing and processing costs; proposals to add such items should address this consideration.

Initial proposals should address the following points:

1. The background and the scientific, theoretical, or methodological motivation for inclusion of the topic in the GSS. Proposals for repeated/panel content should address the gains to be

- realized by obtaining data on within-individual change on the subject;
2. The specific topics, and ideally the specific items or questions, that would be included in the GSS, together with any evidence of the quality of the data they elicit;
  3. Previous usage of the proposed items, or items on similar topics, in the GSS or other surveys;
  4. The appropriateness of the GSS for the proposed items, and any synergies they may involve with GSS project objectives or existing GSS items.
  5. Information about sources, or prospective sources, of support for field costs.

### Criteria for Inclusion of Paid Supplements

Over and above serving the research needs of investigators proposing to add paid supplements, a primary mission of the GSS is to provide high quality data in a timely manner to a large and broad social science user community. Proposals to add content will be evaluated with this latter objective in mind by the GSS Board of Overseers and the principal investigators of the GSS.

The Board and PIs refer to the following criteria while developing and encouraging new content for the GSS:

1. Above all, new content must be of high scientific quality, appropriate to the GSS, and justified on substantive, theoretical or methodological grounds.
2. New content should be useful to a wide range of users (e.g., researchers, teachers, policymakers, etc.) that extends beyond the investigator(s) setting forth a proposal. New content ideally will enhance the understanding and/or usefulness of GSS items in the replicating core, GSS data previously collected as part of a topical module, or data from other sources (e.g., to be used for comparisons).
3. New content must meet human subjects protections, in compliance with the GSS project's IRB approval, NSF and NORC policies. Investigators should determine whether they must also obtain IRB approval at their own institutions.
4. New content must fit within the overall time framework of the survey and must not interfere with respondent cooperation and the integrity of responses to questions later in the survey.

### Time Line for Proposals and Development of Items

Significant lead time is required before new material can be included on a GSS survey. The GSS is currently conducted in even-numbered years (2018, 2020, etc.) To be considered for inclusion in the 2018 GSS, for example, investigators should, if possible, submit proposals to Tom W. Smith, the Principal Investigator and Director of the GSS at NORC ([smitht@norc.uchicago.edu](mailto:smitht@norc.uchicago.edu); phone 773-256-6288) **as soon as possible**, and no later than May 30, 2017. **Proposals submitted earlier have a competitive advantage.** Interested researchers may also wish to consult with the chair of the of the Board of Overseers (currently Deborah Carr, Rutgers University ([carrds@sociology.rutgers.edu](mailto:carrds@sociology.rutgers.edu))).

Each proposal is circulated to the GSS Board and PIs and discussed at the first bi-annual Board meeting following submission; meetings are usually held in mid-fall (September or October) and early spring (late March – early May). The initial review focuses primarily on the compatibility of the proposed

supplement with the GSS mission and format. Subsequently the GSS PIs and Board report back to the investigator proposing the supplement, to convey a general assessment of the project's potential for inclusion in a future GSS. Several forms of collaboration can ensue, from least to most intense:

1. The investigator may receive encouragement and congratulations for an appropriate, important, and fully developed idea.
2. The investigator might be encouraged to work with the GSS PIs to modify items such that they better suit the GSS format and mission.
3. The GSS Board might suggest that one or more of its members (and possibly additional outside scholars) serve as a liaison between the supplement's investigator and the GSS PIs, to further develop ideas and items.
4. The GSS Board may suggest that the supplement's investigators be part of a module development committee centered on a general topic or area linked to the general topic or idea of the supplement. Such committees could consult substantive experts and survey research specialists, and hold meetings, workshops, or collaborative conferences, to refine theoretical ideas, develop survey items that will elicit meaningful evidence, and explore prospects for funding costs of fieldwork.

Subsequent to the review of an initial proposal for a supplement, the Board reviews the status of all proposed supplements at each successive bi-annual meeting until the supplement is either fielded or dropped. In order to be included in the next (e.g. 2018) GSS, proposals for supplements must specify the provisional question wording for all prospective items (if one was not available in the first instance) no later than the spring prior to the survey field period (e.g., by spring 2017 for possible inclusion in the 2018 GSS), and must secure funding no later than the fall prior to the survey field period (e.g. by fall 2017 for the 2018 GSS). It is usually desirable that the wording of proposed items be available sooner than the prior spring, so that they can undergo cognitive pretesting and other developmental work.

During the spring prior to the field period for a GSS, the Board and PIs will designate some supplements for inclusion in a conventional pretest that will be conducted in the summer months (e.g. summer 2017 for the 2018 GSS), to establish (among many other things) the actual interview time requirements of the proposed items. At the subsequent fall meeting, the Board will make a final determination as to the supplements that will be included in the upcoming GSS.

It is important that investigators proposing supplements understand that inclusion of their items cannot be assured until those items have undergone the full cycle of development described above, and until the GSS Board has selected them for inclusion in the GSS at the fall meeting prior to the GSS field period. Space on GSS interview schedules is always limited, and the charge of the GSS Board is to maximize the value of GSS data for social science researchers. The Board and PIs may require that the wording of proposed survey items be changed, based on pretest evidence or other considerations, though such changes will be made in consultation with investigators. Likewise, due to the scarcity of interview time, the Board and PIs may elect to include only a subset of the items proposed as part of a supplement. Data collected for supplements are made available to all GSS users along with the rest of a GSS, roughly six months after data collection is complete.

#### Illustrative supplement timeline for the 2018 GSS

*Prior to June 1, 2016:* Investigator holds preliminary conversation/correspondence with Tom W. Smith at NORC ([smitht@norc.uchicago.edu](mailto:smitht@norc.uchicago.edu))

*By March 1, 2017:* Initial 2-5 page proposal for supplement submitted to Tom W. Smith. **Earlier submission is highly desirable**

*Spring, 2017:* Provisional wording of items set; selection of supplements for inclusion in summer pretest

*Summer, 2017:* Conventional pretest, results disseminated to investigators, PIs, and Board

*Fall, 2017:* Supplement funding secured; Selection of supplements to be included in 2018 GSS

*Winter/summer, 2018:* GSS field period

*Start of 2019 (estimated):* Cleaned and documented GSS data available to investigators and public

For further information, contact Tom W. Smith ([smitht@norc.uchicago.edu](mailto:smitht@norc.uchicago.edu)) or 773-256-6288.