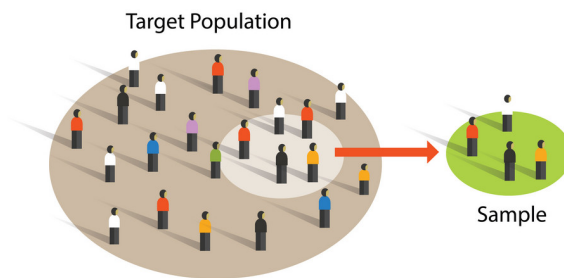


# Identifying your Population of Interest

When doing research, we are looking to better understand a **population** of people. Most of the time, however it is logistically impossible to survey every person in that target population. Because of this, we often draw a **sample** or a subgroup of the population we are interested in. Our hope is that our sample will be **representative** of the population that we are curious about, so we can **generalize** our findings about the sample to our population.



When a sample is **representative**, it means that it reflects the characteristics of the population of interest. In other words, the sample should be similar to the population in terms of demographics, behaviors, attitudes, and other important factors. With a representative sample, researchers can **generalize** findings from the sample to the population with a reasonable degree of confidence.



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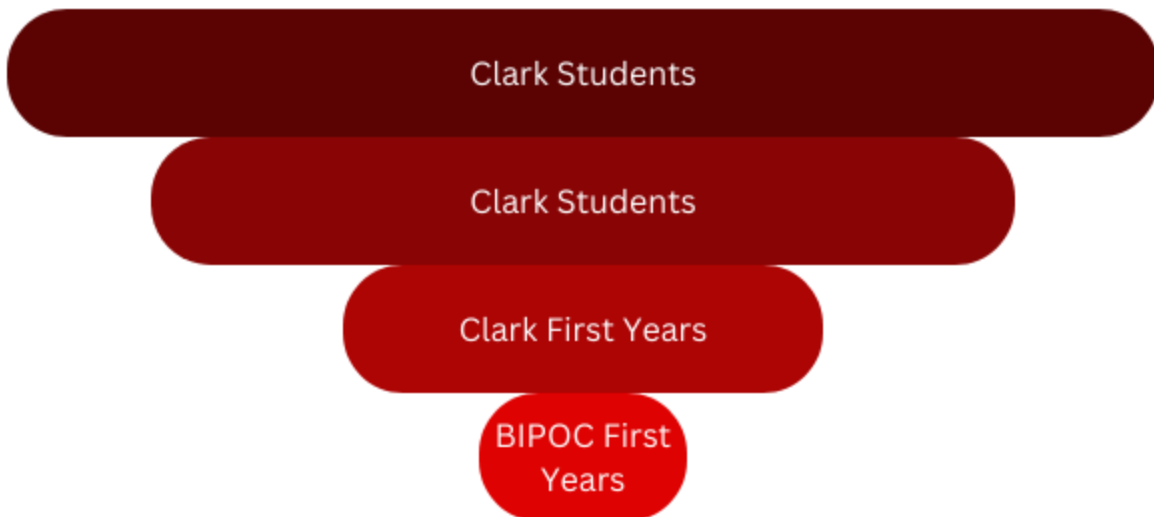
## Who is my population of interest?

Your population of interest is the group of people you are interested in knowing about. It can be very broad, very narrow, or somewhere in-between.

When determining our population of interest, we have to balance selecting a population relevant to our research topics with being able to draw a large enough sample to analyze our data.

- A population that is too broad can make your survey unfocused or too long.
- A population that is too narrow can create problems with getting a large enough sample size.

Sometimes, there are also subpopulations we are interested in. For example, we might be interested in the experiences of Clark University first-year students broadly, but may also be interested in understanding the specific experiences of first-year students of color. To make sure we can answer both sets of research questions, we would want to draw from the larger population of first-year students while making sure we have the data to specifically section out responses from first-year students of color.



### **Understanding Your Population to Guide Your Research**

Characteristics and qualities of population can also mean that different data collection strategies will be more useful and successful. Paying attention to your population and their habits can help make sure you get adequate sample size and that your results are meaningful and usable.

*Planning your data collection strategy*

**Examples:**

- Is your population likely to respond to email surveys? Does it make sense to send reminder emails?
- Are there certain places and spaces where your population tends to gather? Can you partner with those places and spaces to advertise your survey?
- Are there times where you can collect data in-person using pen-and-paper or have people scan QR codes?
- If you are interested in understanding lab experiences of STEM majors, can you ask faculty for some time in their class to advertise your survey?
- If you are interested in dining hall usage, can you reserve a table outside the dining hall during mealtime to collect data via pen-and-paper?

Understanding your population should also inform your survey development by shedding light on what questions are relevant to your population, what terminology will be familiar to them, and what issues are important to them.

*Considering your population when developing your survey*

- Am I asking about experiences that are relevant to my population?
- Am I asking about the topics that impact my population or that they feel strongly about?
- Am I framing the issues and questions in ways that are familiar and understandable to my population?

**Examples:**

- You could ask older students and alumni about their perception of Clark's previous president, David Fithian, but it would not make sense to ask that of younger students who did not overlap with President Fithian.
- A survey for faculty could utilize faculty-oriented acronyms and lingo, whereas that language might not be relevant or understandable to the broader Clark population. *Although, when in doubt, skip the lingo altogether!*

- For students, understanding justice-related topics like food insecurity and food waste are integral to understanding their experiences with the dining hall.