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To colleges serving significant numbers of students who are part-time, adult, and reside off campus, it is important to understand their motivations and needs and to communicate effectively with them in order to plan and provide quality programming. An outcomes assessment approach that focuses on mission-derived institutional outcomes provides information that is useful to student empowerment, marketing and communications, advising, curriculum design, planning, and institutional self-study for accreditation review. This article describes such a program at Thomas Edison State College, relates this institution's experiences with surveys as assessment instruments, and explains how institutional-level outcomes assessment integrates with the institutional self-study process.

Assessing Outcomes at the Institutional Level

An Innovative Outcomes Assessment Program

Thomas Edison State College of New Jersey serves a student population whose average age is thirty-nine. The college was founded to recognize college-level knowledge for college credit, regardless of the source of learning; to develop mechanisms for the conversion of knowledge into credit; and to offer high-quality curricula and degree opportunities consistent with the educational aspirations of adults. Thomas Edison grants associate and baccalaureate degrees, but does not offer classroom instruction. Instead it provides guided independent study, examinations for credit, and evaluation of learning gained outside of the traditional college classroom. Students may also transfer courses from regionally accredited institutions to Thomas Edison without limit.

The student body of Thomas Edison shares the distinct characteristics that set metropolitan universities apart from more traditional institutions. The students are highly diverse in their ethnicity, age range, and academic interests. They also differ in terms of the nature of their relationship with the institution. They live off campus, have other significant life priorities that compete with their academic careers, and pursue studies on a part-time or intermittent basis. In many ways, the students at

Thomas Edison, as at other metropolitan universities, constitute a special clientele whose motivations and desires need to be understood and addressed in order to shape the teaching/learning environment and to assess its outcomes. For this reason, the considerable emphasis on survey research as an important component of the integrated outcomes assessment program of Thomas Edison may be of interest to metropolitan universities elsewhere.

The Use of Surveys for Assessment at the Institutional Level

When Thomas Edison State College initiated the outcomes assessment program, it recognized the value of student learning outcomes as a method for evaluating the curriculum and the learning process. Staff also felt that much of the college's success depends on the institutional processes developed to address its priorities. Therefore, the college developed a broad array of measurement techniques to assess institutional outcomes. One of the more valuable approaches was the use of survey instruments. Several institutional actions, including restructuring student service functions and revising publications, were supported by the addition of assessment data made available to decision makers.

The survey approach used by Thomas Edison is readily adaptable to any college setting and may be attractive to metropolitan universities serving large off-campus, adult student populations. Surveys can be conducted in-house for very low dollar cost, but at considerable time expense. As an alternative, the use of a survey research company can help to authenticate results and can greatly shorten the time necessary to conduct large-scale surveys.

Student Empowerment

Student empowerment is crucial to the success of Thomas Edison College. Its responsibility for students' development differs from residential institutions that serve primarily eighteen to twenty-two year-old students. As independent adults, students of Thomas Edison are self-directed, goal oriented, and capable of making intelligent decisions regarding their educational careers. The college controls the parameters of the curriculum, but not the sequence, the method, nor the timing of credit acquisition. Hence, the college is empowering students to make proper decisions regarding their academic careers and providing flexible, academically sound options tailored to the needs of adult, distant learners. Therefore, this priority focuses on the quality and accessibility of information provided to current and prospective students. The efficacy, accuracy, timeliness, and appropriateness of the college's communications determine the degree to which students' needs can be met through the Thomas Edison model.

The First Assessment

The first survey conducted by the college focused on the intended outcomes of student empowerment and supplemented the assessment of student learning and the analysis of program outcomes. The survey had the following objectives:

- To get information about how adults regard college degrees
- To get information about adults' education plans
- To understand how adults choose a college
- To test levels of knowledge about Thomas Edison
- To get information about the Inquire-to-Enroll processes
- To gain insights about specific student populations
- To get ratings/opinions about Thomas Edison publications
- To better understand Thomas Edison's inactive students

Because these objectives applied to various students and nonstudents, Thomas Edison decided to conduct five different, but related, surveys directed at five different adult populations:

- Prospective students—adults who did not possess a college degree,
- Inquirers—individuals who had requested information from the college,
- Applicants—individuals who had applied, but not yet enrolled,
- Enrolled students, and
- Inactive students—students whose active status had lapsed through nonpayment of an annual fee.

Before embarking on survey research, the college identified detailed anticipated outcomes for the fourth objective: to test levels of knowledge about Thomas Edison. Because students and would-be students need to understand clearly the relative roles of the college and its clients, the intended outcomes took the form of stating what adults need to know about the options available through the college and how to relate these options to their backgrounds and educational plans. For instance, the college determined that an applicant needs to understand that specific credentials or experiences can be translated into college credit through Thomas Edison processes. Once enrolled, however, a student needs to be able to relate his or her credentials and experiences to specific options and to specific degree requirements. In all, the college identified sixty-nine items adults should know as they progress from the prospective student stage through inquiry, application, enrollment, and graduation.

This survey approach is readily adaptable to any college that wishes to examine how students respond to various aspects of the institutional environment. For instance, a college could establish evaluation objectives regarding campus security, access via public transportation, parking, library or bookstore availability, quality of teaching, etc., and, if appropriate, set performance standards in terms of detailed outcomes for each. By surveying a cross section of students, representative information can be gleaned that will help to inform the decision making and planning processes.

Thomas Edison decided to use a survey research firm to construct and conduct the five surveys for two reasons: a small staff already involved in coordinating planning, institutional research, and outcomes assessment, and the desire to obtain survey results from professionally constructed, administered, and analyzed instruments. The firm worked closely with the institution in drafting appropriate questions, and then conducted five telephone surveys consisting of two hundred interviews, ten-to-twelve minutes each. The surveys provided minimal analysis, given Thomas Edison's desire to conduct its own review of the raw data. Including preparation and planning time, the five surveys were completed in a period of nine months. Another two months were spent in analyzing, disseminating, and discussing the results.

The surveys provided useful information in a variety of ways. First, the college acquired base-line information from adults without degrees regarding their attitudes toward college degrees. The findings indicated that large majorities of all groups feel a degree is very important today and that career preparation and advancement were rated as the key reasons to earn a college degree.

Second, the surveys provided valuable information for Thomas Edison's marketing strategies, including new data on college aspirations of adults without degrees not currently enrolled in college; New Jersey adults' awareness of Thomas Edison; how students learned about the college; and the factors that most influenced them to apply to and enroll in the college. The college also received information useful to institutional planning, in that the plans of inquirers, applicants, and inactive students helped in projecting future enrollment trends.

Questions about the helpfulness, readability, and clarity of Thomas Edison publications indicated that applicants and enrolled students generally viewed all publications mentioned as helpful or very helpful. The results helped the college to prioritize the schedule for revamping less-effective publications over a period of several years.

Questions were also asked of applicants, enrolled students, and inactive students that tested their knowledge of college policies and procedures and their understanding of the relative responsibilities of Thomas Edison and its adult learners. These questions revealed a few instances of misinformation, which were responded to in new versions of publications and in admissions and academic advising interactions with applicants and students.

The Thomas Edison approach accommodates the fact that adults may have to discontinue degree pursuits in favor of other priorities. However, the college had no previous data on why students went inactive or on what their level of satisfaction was when they discontinued their enrollments. Through survey questions, the college learned that 85 percent of inactive students surveyed left the college for personal reasons and that nearly two in three were very or somewhat satisfied with the college's ability to meet their needs. Two in five indicated the likelihood of returning to the college in the future.

Other Uses of the Data

The preceding discussion describes only a portion of the total findings of this adult-learner survey project. The college received a significant amount of data covering a wide variety of topics and was able to respond in several ways to the findings. In addition, the effort had several generic outcomes:

- The college collected important base-line data that will serve as a basis for additional research and will allow for the establishment of realistic outcomes objectives for such areas as satisfaction level and opinion of publications.
- The results often confirmed the staff's experiential knowledge of reality and provided a quantitative basis for prioritizing and acting on needed changes.
- The college gained new knowledge about its clientele and about its operations, which has been assimilated into marketing, planning, admissions, academic advising, and college communications.

It is important to note that changes did not result directly from any particular survey finding. Rather, the analysis provided decision makers with important information in considering resource allocation, operational strategies, and long-term plans. Since the surveys were conducted, however, the college has restructured the admissions and academic advising functions, significantly revised publications, increased follow-up contact with applicants, and increased the public relations and publications staff. All of these changes are supported by survey findings.

With two hundred interviews, the sampling error allowance is 7 percentage points above or below the survey result. In general this did not matter, given the general objectives of these surveys. However, meaningful subgroup comparisons were difficult to extract because of the sampling error. While it was possible occasionally to find meaningful differences between men and women or between New Jersey residents and nonresidents, the data did not provide useful data on subgroup differences for race/ethnicity.

A free-response opportunity at the end of the surveys turned out to be of little use. The responses were extremely varied and difficult to categorize except in very general terms as positive, negative, or neutral comments. Free-response items were omitted from future surveys.

Applying Survey Techniques in Institutional Self-Study

Student Surveys

In 1990, approximately one year after the completion of the survey project described above, Thomas Edison initiated the process of institutional self-study for a reaccreditation visit in the spring of 1992. As part of this, college personnel decided to survey applicants, enrolled students, and graduates, the three groups that are best able to advise the institution on how effectively the college communicates with its clientele and also

how well it meets its stated standards for providing programs and services to them.

For this survey exercise, the college employed an approach similar to that used in the earlier survey described above. The initial task was to identify those parameters of institutional effectiveness for which the surveyed groups could provide useful data. Four general areas were identified: usefulness and timeliness of college communications, reaction to college programs and services, usefulness of Thomas Edison degrees, and graduate school experience. The first two areas carry performance standards that the college communicates to applicants and students, the third is a direct measure of one aspect of the institutional mission, and the fourth area is one commonly used indication of the quality of an institution's curricula.

Additionally, the college took advantage of the survey work to collect follow-up data to certain base-line results from the earlier survey project. Specifically, follow-up items addressed adults' motivations for seeking a degree and for choosing Thomas Edison, as well as how these groups originally heard about the college. New questions were developed concerning the college's effectiveness in telephone communications, the "reasonableness" of Thomas Edison degree requirements, and the respondents' opinion of the quality of services received. As in the earlier survey, the questions were drafted with the help of an outside firm, which then conducted telephone interviews with three hundred graduates, two hundred students, and two hundred applicants.

College communications received high grades from applicants and students, indicating the success of revisions over the previous twenty-four months. Once again, some aspects of printed information did not receive ratings as high as others. This information continues to be useful in prioritizing revision schedules.

Thomas Edison knew that the acceptance rate of its graduates into graduate school is very high. This survey showed it to be 92 percent. But the college was surprised to discover that three of four Thomas Edison alumni either had applied or planned to apply to graduate school. The continued motivation to learn found in Thomas Edison graduates is a different kind of quality outcome than the graduate school acceptance rate, but one no less valuable to this institution.

In another instance, nearly half of the graduates reported receiving raises or promotions because of a degree from Thomas Edison. This finding clearly demonstrates one valid reason for the existence of Thomas Edison as a credentialing agency. Many adults have skills or abilities that would qualify them for higher positions in their organization, but without a college degree such positions are unattainable.

As with the earlier adult-learner survey work, Thomas Edison was able to collect and, in some areas, extend base-line data to confirm what was generally believed to be true, and to acquire new knowledge about its clientele. However, the confidence limits issue again limited comparisons

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between subgroups to those with sufficiently large numbers to allow comparability. Again, such breakdowns were not critical to the research, but would be of interest to the college.

The usefulness of the data within the context of institutional self-study was an important result. Work groups studying various aspects of college operations were anxious to receive and understand results, and the results themselves supported and were consistent with findings acquired with other methods. The self-study proved to be a focused, integrated outcomes assessment project with strong staff commitment and support at all levels.

Surveying College Staff

With the value of surveys to test assumptions and outcomes and to gather new information established, the self-study work groups recognized the potential benefit in surveying the entire college staff for the first time. Ordinarily, surveys of employees are a fairly controversial undertaking. However, the Thomas Edison project generated little resistance. Several factors combined to generate broad-based support and a high return rate. Eighty-five percent of the professional and administrative staff were involved in the self-study, and most saw the value of the survey. The second factor was the recent success of prior surveys in enhancing institutional effectiveness. The third factor was the use of an outside firm to conduct the survey and tabulate responses.

Once the creation and administration of the staff survey was agreed upon, each work group generated a list of questions to ask staff. With eight work groups, the questions comprised quite a lengthy list. The work groups wanted to learn how well the staff knew the mission and future direction of the college, how well the college communicates its priorities to staff, and how well the college prepares its employees for work assignments, all areas that are essential frontiers in the field of outcomes assessment of institutional effectiveness. The resulting long and varied list of thirty-nine questions was made feasible by using a mail survey rather than a telephone survey.

The survey, using interoffice mail and effective publicity, generated a very good response rate. One hundred (or 80 percent) of the 125 surveys were returned, a rate that indicates a high degree of support for the project, particularly considering that the survey took twenty to thirty minutes to complete.

The results indicated that the staff has a remarkably clear and strong concept of the mission and future direction of Thomas Edison and a less specific knowledge of the formal mission statement and long-range plan document. The staff feels the college is doing well in achieving the various aspects of its mission, yet the results clearly indicate areas that are relatively stronger or weaker. The college also identified differences in the quality of intraoffice communications across divisions. Staff demonstrated a high degree of confidence in the usefulness of each of fourteen listed publications for students, although they reported some gaps in their familiarity with certain publications. Training programs and opportunities were generally given high grades, with the exception of computer training,

which was eventually cited in the college's self-study report as an area requiring continued attention.

In almost every case, managers were better informed than professional staff, and secretarial/clerical staff indicated less knowledge or information about a number of questions. However, the levels of familiarity of all professional staff (96 percent) and all secretarial/clerical staff (65 percent) with the mission statement are considered by the college to be extraordinary figures.

The information received from this survey was very useful in the self-study, not only for demonstrating the strength and commitment of college staff and the success of managerial activities, but also for pointing out areas of staff affairs that required attention and/or further study. The college was able to address several important staff issues in a straightforward way because of information provided by the survey.

Because no whole staff survey had been conducted before at Thomas Edison, essentially all the data represents new information. Much of this became part of the accreditation self-study report, while other aspects have been woven into the fabric of institutional information to be used as needed in planning and in decision-making.

Surveying Consulting Faculty

Thomas Edison's mechanism for acquiring academic expertise necessary for any college involves the hiring of faculty from other institutions on a consulting basis to provide academic oversight, assessment of experiential learning, and mentoring in distance learning courses. Because the consulting faculty are not regular members of the staff, it is important that they receive effective orientation and training in the various tasks they perform. The successful recruitment and development of these academics depend on Thomas Edison's understanding of their motivations for accepting assignments as consulting faculty. Additionally, because they are external to the day-to-day functioning of the institution, yet understand the college very well, consulting faculty are in an excellent position to evaluate the effectiveness of the aspects of college activity with which they come in contact.

The self-study provided a context in which the kinds of information available from the consulting faculty could be examined, prioritized, and collected. Again, the approach taken was one of focusing on institutionally intended outcomes, accompanied by the collection of other useful data. To collect this data, the college decided on a mail survey, to be conducted in the same way as the staff survey.

The consulting faculty survey had several objectives geared toward outcomes measures, including:

- To determine the effectiveness of orientation and training workshops and supporting materials,
- To acquire evaluative data on the abilities of college staff and students,
- To obtain opinions on the appropriateness of academic standards employed in credit-awarding programs, and

- To acquire informed opinions about the effectiveness of the college in achieving its mission priorities.

Additionally, the survey was used to obtain information about faculty motivations for working with Thomas Edison and also a sense of the range and frequency of duties performed by consulting faculty consultants. Data on these areas had not been previously collected and were expected to be useful in planning future recruitment and training of consultant faculty.

A total of 254 surveys were distributed, and 156 were returned on a single mailing, for a response rate of 61 percent. Like the staff survey, the consulting faculty survey represents a first broad-scale survey effort with this population. Much of the data was of value in the self-study analysis and report, while other information received served as a basis for continuing current practices, for corrective action, or for further study.

The college gained useful information about what motivates faculty to work for Thomas Edison and about the diversity of this group. The latter information was instrumental in redesigning the consulting faculty computer data base.

Survey research has proven to be a valuable component of the outcomes assessment program at Thomas Edison State College. From its initial objective of learning about how effectively the college communicates key information to its student clientele, the college has expanded the application of survey instruments to a variety of constituencies and purposes, and has gained information of value to institutional planning and decision making. The college has also learned that carefully considered and constructed surveys constitute a valuable tool in the conduct of institutional self-study. The college has woven survey results into the fabric of institutional information and has successfully employed this information to maintain and to improve the overall quality of Thomas Edison State College.

Suggested Readings

- Jonas, Peter M. "Assessing Adult Student Opinion." *Adult Assessment Forum* (Fall 1992): 12.
- Seybert, Jeffrey A. "Community College Strategies." *Assessment Update* (July–August 1992): 13.
- Tucker, Robert W. "A New Agenda for a New American Student" *Adult Assessment Forum* (Summer 1992): 3–5.