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ABSTRACT

A centralized, university-wide approach to collecting alumni information was established. The centralized approach provided information with greater potential for utilization, permitted comparisons among university units, and generated information on trends in alumni outcomes from year to year. All alumni in a given class are surveyed in order to generate a large enough response pool. The various uses of alumni research in academic planning are discussed, including: (1) assessing the effectiveness of the general education program; (2) institutional planning and budget review; (3) documenting the need for changes in programs or for new programs; (4) enhancing external funding by documenting alumni success; (5) accreditation review and self-study; and (6) develop and evaluate curricular changes. Contains 11 references. (KM)

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Alumni Research

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Using Alumni Outcomes Research in Academic Planning

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Teresa Karolewski
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Abstract

This paper focuses on a unique application of alumni research--academic planning. Results of this paper concentrate on the type of information that is collected, why it is important in academic planning, and how it is used. Examples are given of how different types of information are used differently by the university's academic program units. This paper should be of interest to institutional researchers involved with alumni studies who want to get the maximum use from the information they collect.

Using Alumni Outcomes Research in Academic Planning

Alumni surveys have been used by colleges and universities for many years for a variety of reasons (McClain & Krueger, 1985; Pace, 1979), and they have been recommended to be used in assessing quality in higher education (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education, 1984). Indeed, they provide faculty and administrators with crucial information about "the place of graduates in the world of work and their judgments about the college experience" (Wilson, 1982, p. 4). Ohio University has taken a unique approach to using alumni research in its broad institutional impact assessment program. This paper focuses on the use of alumni research in program review and curriculum and academic program planning.

Pace (1979) identified ten landmark alumni studies that provided evidence that alumni research can be used to assess the impact of an institution on its students. Many of these studies addressed similar job-related outcomes, such as occupational level, salary, and job satisfaction. Educational outcomes, such as satisfaction with the educational experience, relationship between one's job and major program of study, and the relevance of one's major to one's career goals, can also be examined.

In general, graduates indicate in alumni surveys that they learn much while in college (Pace, 1979). They report developing critical thinking abilities, acquiring knowledge and skills in a

specialized field, and developing personally and socially. They report that they find desirable jobs, earn respectable incomes, report satisfaction with their college experience, and would choose the same educational path given the chance to do it over again. They report that they like their jobs and that their college experience was related to their career. They indicate that their educational experience was beneficial to them in many ways.

Alumni research, along with other student outcomes measures, can be used for a variety of purposes, as suggested by Ewell (1983). Applications include academic program review and evaluation, increasing retention, institutional planning, accreditation self-studies, and marketing and public relations efforts.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) made suggestions about ways colleges and universities should use alumni research (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 1981). Alumni research should be used in decisions about the academic program and curriculum from information about what happens to students after graduation. Alumni research should affect decisions about problems or needs in the academic program or curriculum, course content, and general education and major requirements. Alumni research should provide information about the formation and operation of student service areas, alumni relations, and public relations. Alumni

research should provide information to assist in resource allocation and institutional planning decisions.

Alumni research is being used increasingly in multidimensional assessment programs (Harris, 1985; Hartle, 1985; Williford & Moden, 1987). For example, Northeast Missouri State University uses alumni research to provide information about educational goals, graduates' perceptions about the university, and progress toward specific personal objectives, along with research from value-added testing (McClain & Krueger, 1985).

Ohio University uses alumni research in a variety of these ways. Alumni research has evolved over the last few years from a decentralized approach to a centralized approach which enables the Office of Institutional Research to provide different areas of the University with different uses for alumni information. These uses have strong implications for other institutional researchers who are involved in collecting and distributing alumni research information.

Development of Alumni Research at Ohio University

Alumni research at Ohio University is part of an institutional commitment to assess its impact on its students. In a 1980 State of the University address President Charles J. Ping called for the University to make a commitment to growth in quality. In making this commitment the University, in keeping with its ten-year educational plan, had a responsibility to define and examine its progress toward its growth in quality.

The President's speech stated that to be of value this assessment of quality must have consequences and offer direction for decision-making and action (Ping, 1980).

The President appointed an institutional impact task force of faculty and staff to meet with the director of institutional research to develop a coherent, systematic, and ongoing program of assessment of institutional impact. The primary goal of this assessment was that in five to ten years the University could describe what was happening in its life as an educational institution.

The institutional impact task force spent one year developing a program for assessing the impact of the college experience on Ohio University students. This program considered such goals in the "Ten-Year Educational Plan" as "providing our students with the knowledge and skills which are the essence of a solid liberal education" and "encouraging the development of an environment of the residential campus that reflects a vital commitment to learning and provides a community life for students." To provide information about these goals, assessment was aimed at the broad impact of the collegiate experience and not at specific knowledge and skills gained from a major field of study. The outcomes assessment program provided a broad-based yet flexible set of measuring devices. It was broad because it allowed for a sufficiently diverse set of measures that enable a breadth of information to be gathered, and it was flexible with

respect to its acceptance of new instruments as they become available and modification of old instruments as they become dated.

Assessment of alumni outcomes was a major focus of the new institutional assessment program recommended by the task force. The University had varying degrees of success in collecting this information before the institutional impact project because different academic colleges and departments used different instruments. The data could be used within each department, but comparisons between departments were not possible. No overall University-wide results were available. A need existed for coordination of the University's efforts to collect information on its alumni.

As a result a centralized approach to collecting alumni information was established. The centralized approach provided information that had greater potential for utilization. Comparisons could be made between different units of the University. Trends of alumni outcomes information could be recorded from year to year.

Two separate alumni research instruments were developed. The first was a placement survey which was designed to collect information on graduates within one year of graduation, such as employment status, graduate or professional school attendance, and limited information on job satisfaction.

A more detailed study of graduates was developed to survey

them after they had been away from the University for at least five years. The questionnaire was developed from scales from instruments used in a study by the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (Wishart & Rossman, 1977), the Center for Helping Organizations Improve Choice for Education (Project CHOICE), and locally developed questions from Ohio University's eight academic colleges.

The questionnaire was divided into three major sections. The first section asked questions about type of job held, employment status, salary, employment satisfaction, nature of employment responsibilities, future expectations, relevance of educational experience to employment, and problems in seeking employment. There was also a group of questions asking about whether various competencies were needed and developed. These questions asked the respondents to evaluate 14 different competencies in terms of whether each was needed and the extent to which each was developed at Ohio University. The competencies that were included were the following abilities: think analytically; apply knowledge from my major field to new problems; acquire new skills and understanding on my own; write well; communicate effectively orally; evaluate and choose between alternative courses of action; formulate creative and original ideas and solutions; convey meaning through artistic and creative expression; cope with complex moral and ethical issues; place current problems in historical, cultural, and philosophical

perspective; utilize the political process; organize and supervise work of others; use the computer as an analytical tool; and sensitivity to feelings and perceptions of others.

The second section of the questionnaire asked questions about respondents' program of study and the current satisfaction with their undergraduate programs at Ohio University. Alumni are asked to rate their undergraduate major program in the areas of relevance to career goals, academic advising, inspiration and encouragement, level of rigor and scholarship, interaction with faculty, quality of instruction, and career planning and placement services associated with their major. "What if" questions are asked to determine if alumni would make changes in their college choices if they had the chance to do it over again. Would they change their major, take more electives, enroll in more general education courses, take part in internships, or would they do it all the same way? Questions are asked about additional coursework taken and degrees awarded since graduation from Ohio University.

In the last four years of the study each of the eight academic undergraduate colleges at Ohio University participated in the development of the third section of the questionnaire. This section of the questionnaire contained college-specific questions which included areas specific to each college's disciplines and programs.

College-specific alumni data was needed for several reasons.

The creation of a general university-wide questionnaire precluded questions specific to academic disciplines. Since the Office of Institutional Research assumed the role of coordinating one large survey of alumni in place of several college-administered surveys the colleges lost their source of program-specific feedback. The addition of college-specific questions to the general questionnaire was well-received by different areas of the University because it provided the efficiency of conducting one survey instead of eight or more surveys. It addressed program-specific needs for information. The use of college-specific questions provides each of the academic colleges with direct answers to curriculum review questions that relate to general education or major program courses.

The centralized alumni research project was one study with eight components. Eight separate questionnaires were prepared; the first two sections were identical, and the third section of each questionnaire was reserved for the college-specific questions. The staff from the Office of Institutional Research worked with each college in developing insight about what information was needed and in designing these college-specific questions. The College of Arts and Sciences section included items involving student services and non-major course requirements. The College of Business Administration section included items involving teaching and advising and participation in student organizations. The College of Education section

contained 37 items that asked about competencies needed in education professions. The College of Engineering section included items involving academic program, availability and quality of equipment, and non-major Engineering course requirements. The College of Fine Arts section included items involving employment opportunities and career preparation for employment in the arts. The college of Health and Human Services section had items related to continuing education opportunities after graduating, participation in professional organizations, use of microcomputers, and contacts with prospective students. The University College section asked questions about general education requirements, student services, and evaluation of the general studies degree.

The entire population of the classes are surveyed in order to generate a large enough response pool to be able to produce results specific to each academic college and department. This approach enabled the preparation of detailed reports for each academic unit that could be used for program evaluation and program review. Had samples been used, many departments would have had insufficient data due to their small numbers of graduates.

University-Wide Uses

Alumni research is used for assessing the effectiveness of the general education program. The dean of the University College has been involved with the Office of Institutional

Research in identifying general education outcomes through the use of the ACT College Outcomes Measures Program (COMP). Alumni study results complement COMP results by providing responses to questions about the general education program, about what competencies are needed, and about the extent to which the general education program is achieving its purposes. General education proponents use feedback from alumni on the value of oral and written communications in today's job market to request additional funds for additional general education course offerings.

Each fall the Ohio University Board of Trustees receive an in-depth report of one of the dimensions of the assessment program, and a general report is given on the status of the overall project. Alumni research is always a popular subject with the trustees since by state law a majority of them must be Ohio University graduates. Trustees are interested in the educational outcomes of Ohio University graduates in relation to the outcomes of other institutions. Information directly from alumni research may be trustees' only reliable and systematic feedback about the University from fellow graduates. This information affects their perceptions of the University's achievements in terms of the activities of and feedback from its graduates.

Alumni research is used in institutional planning and budget review at several levels. At the senior administrative level,

alumni information provides guidance in terms of strengths and weaknesses of various aspects of the whole university. For example, information from alumni about the University's image affects the development and direction of its public relations and recruiting efforts. The University's "University Planning and Advisory Council," (UPAC) which links budgeting and program planning, receives alumni research results because it is used in specific budget requests for new ventures for the University.

Academic departments and programs use alumni research to document or support the need for new programs or changes in existing programs. Academic departments use alumni research to document the success of their alumni to give support for additional faculty in expanding academic programs.

External funding of academic programs has been enhanced by the availability of alumni research documenting the success of their graduates. In the past four years, the State of Ohio has established enrichment grants at colleges and universities that are judged to have programs of high quality. Alumni research information has been used successfully by four academic departments at Ohio University in their proposals for recent Ohio Board of Regents "Program Excellence" awards. The Honors Tutorial "College," and the Departments of Journalism, Telecommunications, and Visual Communications all used alumni research results to document the success of their students in this statewide academic competition for enrichment grants. A

total of about \$650,000 has been awarded to these departments at Ohio University.

Alumni research is used for accreditation review and self-study. The University reported traditional alumni study information, such as salary, job placement, type of occupational area, and continuing education to demonstrate follow-up of students and to document student success to accrediting agencies. College-specific questions are used for the same purpose. For example, the College of Education asked thirty-seven questions related to aspects of education instruction that have been used in National Center for Accreditation of Teacher Education accreditation reviews.

In 1983 much of Ohio University's alumni research was included in the comprehensive review of the North Central Association accreditation review process as part of the impact assessment research. While current criticisms of institutional reviews by accreditation associations have pointed to a general weakness in institutions' assessment data, the North Central Association review team suggested that Ohio University may have too much data. New uses for the University's outcome assessment are continually being developed.

Applications in Academic Planning for Specific Programs

The academic deans at Ohio University collectively form the Deans Council, one of the major planning units on campus. Reports of alumni research results are presented to the Council

on a regular basis, and information from these reports is incorporated into their decision-making process.

Each college receives its own personalized reports designed to meet its specific information needs. Staff from the Institutional Research Office meet directly with each dean's office staff to review the alumni research for that college. This review includes an executive summary and a detailed analysis for each college and academic department within the college. Institutional Research staff also attend college department chair meetings and distribute results to all department chairs on the findings of research about their graduates. These meetings produce valuable feedback about the process and the content of alumni research. The Institutional Research staff has the opportunity to discuss program-specific results. Specific questions about the results from faculty are addressed. Department chairs and deans have direct input in deciding what specific questions should be asked in the next administration of the survey.

The academic colleges have used the results of this data to develop a number of programs and evaluate different curricular options. The College of Arts and Sciences was concerned about the perception of the college's numerous course requirements which are in addition to general studies requirements. These include specific coursework in foreign language, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, which may be outside a

student's academic major. Responses from alumni led to the conclusion that this required coursework was important to the Arts and Sciences curriculum and was very relevant to graduates' careers. These findings eliminated the need for a faculty committee to review these questions, since the data provided positive feedback supporting current program requirements.

The College of Arts and Sciences also used the results from open-ended questions in the alumni questionnaire to develop a new faculty awards program. Information from the open-ended questions led to the conclusion that particular faculty had been extremely influential in the graduates' personal development, since alumni often mention individual faculty as being mentors to them while they were undergraduates. From these findings the College instituted an alumni faculty awards program. Each year the College's Society of Alumni and Friends selects outstanding faculty to receive special recognition. Part of the information used for this selection comes directly from the open-ended questions.

The College of Business has incorporated the results of the Alumni surveys as part of the information that is used by its planning committee. Results are reviewed in the aggregate for the College and for each academic department within the College. This review is used to identify specific strengths and weaknesses of each academic unit. Business alumni reported that they did not have enough contact with business executives while they were

in their undergraduate degree program. They reported that it was extremely important to bring the "real world" into the classroom. Results of this review led to the development of the "Executive On-Campus Program," through which active business executives regularly visit the College and take an active role in instruction at the undergraduate level.

Business graduates also reported a need to improve their writing skills. As a consequence the college emphasized writing skills by changing courses to incorporate more written assignments, papers, and essays. In addition, multiple choice tests were replaced, where possible, by essay examinations.

Data from alumni research was used in the development of a job placement strategy for College of Business graduates. The College reviewed the types of positions and areas of employment held by its graduates and strengths of alumni were identified to assist currently strong programs. In areas where few alumni reported being employed, the College developed strategies to alleviate the shortage. This was accomplished by contacting employers in these areas and encouraging placement of graduates.

Information helpful in the recruitment process is used heavily by the College of Communication. Because most communication majors are "first generation" in their field there is a lack of understanding about the career paths of communication graduates. Parents of entering Communication

students often ask, "What type of jobs can you get with a degree in communication?" Alumni research is used extensively in planning recruitment programs for new students and pre-college orientation programs for parents and students to describe the career paths, salary history, and examples of professional success of past College of Communication graduates.

The College of Communication uses alumni data to recruit advisors for boards of visitors for each of its schools and departments. This information is one of the most important sources of the pool of available professionals that could serve as external advisors to the college.

Application of alumni research in the College of Engineering assisted in the "futures" planning of the college. The college dean and the college's external advisory board were developing a plan for the College for the 1990's. This process required an extensive environmental scan for the College, encompassing a review of both the internal and external environments. The alumni research collected by the Institutional Research Office became a critical part of this study and was readily available. It provided information about the strengths of its graduates in a changing market for engineers.

External alumni involvement concerning alumni research led directly to a change in the curriculum in the College of Engineering. A member of the Ohio University National Alumni Board, who was also a graduate of the College of Engineering,

became involved with the College after reading an annual report on alumni generated by the Institutional Research Office. Based on the report this board member noted that while College of Engineering graduates had been giving very high evaluations to the engineering program, they had also reported a lack of broad interpersonal communication training in their undergraduate major. As a result of this finding, the Alumni Board member met with the Engineering dean to discuss incorporating more interpersonal communication training in the engineering curriculum.

In the College of Health and Human Services alumni research is used for program review purposes. The College uses alumni research information to document the strengths and needs of each of its academic programs. This documentation is crucial, since all university academic programs reviewed every five years by the University Program Review Committee. Each department in the College develops profiles of its graduates to document their success, the quality of their preparation and their ratings of the department's academic program.

Continuing education programs for alumni also rely on the use of alumni data. Through the alumni survey, the College of Health and Human Services collects information on its graduates' use of and need for microcomputers in their profession. Faculty in each academic department then developed workshops to meet the reported needs of the alumni. Workshops were then offered to

alumni at appropriate times and locations.

At Ohio University the responsibility for serving the undecided students exists in the University College. This college administers a baccalaureate degree program in general studies which provides an opportunity for undergraduates to design their own education. The college is extremely interested in the careers of these general studies graduates and uses alumni research to evaluate its program. In addition, data collected from alumni provide a valuable resource for prospective students about the types of career fields and life experiences they might expect after graduation with a general studies degree.

The dean of the University College also has major responsibility for general education at Ohio University. This program was revised in the early 1980's, and the evaluation of the general education program by alumni is being used as a part of the criteria to measure its success. This use is especially revealing because alumni who experienced the former general education program were compared with alumni who completed coursework under the new general education program, and comparisons between the two programs were made to evaluate the needs for general education in today's job market.

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to provide examples of the variety of uses of alumni research in academic planning. Implications for institutional researchers at other campuses

exist because they may have different roles and tasks to perform to ensure maximum utilization of information on an institution's alumni.

Centralized alumni research presents unique problems in coordinating the collection of data for a variety of needs. Alumni research information needs to be presented at different administrative levels within an institution. Different areas have different uses for the information they receive that require different forms and levels of detail. Academic colleges may seek general evidence of success of students, while academic departments may use specific information for program review. Different levels of presentation require different formats of presentation. Certain departments may not require an extensive summary of findings, but they may only be interested in results of their own graduates. Comparisons between specific programs and the university as a whole are usually desired by faculty and staff in those programs.

Through careful coordination with many campus constituencies, alumni research is applied to a number of programs such as curriculum planning, academic program planning, student assessment, resource allocation, and program review.

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