NORMES

The Alumni Survey: Program Implications for School Leaders

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Abstract
Universities have long practiced data collection techniques to gain insights and direction from their graduates, but public high schools are just now beginning to use this process to gather input from those who know the system the best – their alumni. Because past students' reflections on their high school education can indicate the level of success of their high schools' programs and practices, principals can use this information to identify areas needing improvement and then develop strategies for improvement. The Poudre School District (PSD) in Fort Collins, Colorado, serves approximately 24,000 students in its 49 schools (at the time of this study). As a means of initiating effective communication between alumni and PSD's five high schools, an online survey was constructed and placed on the Internet using SurveyMonkey.com, an online, commercially available web survey supplier. The findings drawn from the experiences of responding alumni provided insights as to those factors that contribute to the success of high school programs and practices. Principals can use this information to identify areas needing improvement and then develop strategies for school improvement, i.e. student achievement, facilities, and communications with parents and alumni. This article demonstrates how alumni research at the PK-12 school level can be designed and used effectively by school leaders to support policy development and a range of institutional improvements aimed at personalizing the learning environment.

Introduction

Community attitudes toward the public schools shape the initiatives and strategies designed for school improvement. Those attitudes can be especially informative when the feedback comes from recent graduates. "Polling has become an important player in most aspects of American life, and the effort to improve the public schools is no exception" (Rose & Gallup, 2005, p. 54).

Universities have long practiced data collection techniques to gain insights and direction from their graduates, but public high schools are just now beginning to use this process to gather input from those who know the system the best—their alumni. Because past students' reflections on their high school education may be an indicator of the level of success of their high schools' programs, practices, and extra curricular activities, principals can use this information to identify areas needing improvement and then develop strategies for improvement.

A common theme in the current high school reform movement focuses on the need to make high school more relevant to and meaningful in the lives of students. A growing body of research shows that making high school more related to a student's everyday life can have positive impacts on attendance, promotion, dropout rates, and even student achievement and post-secondary enrollment decisions (Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone, 2001; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Legters, Balfanz, Jordan & McPartland, 2002; Plank, 2001; Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 2000). Graduates, however have been often overlooked as valuable data sources regarding the relevancy of school programs to students' lives.

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate how alumni research at the PK-12 school level can be designed and used effectively by school leaders to support a range of institutional improvements aimed at personalizing the learning environment.

Study Setting and Design

The work of school leaders is vital in linking alumni input to outcomes in local contexts, and these leaders need avenues of influence, strategies, and tools with which to successfully accomplish such work (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). According to *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, a report by the National Association of Secondary School

Principals, schools should "institute structural leadership changes that allow for meaningful involvement in decision making by students, teachers, family members, and the community and that support effective communication with these groups" (NASSP, 2004, p. 6). One influential community stakeholder group, often overlooked for input when seeking opportunities for meaningful change for high school reform, is the school's alumni. The key to effectively soliciting information from alumni is tied to obtaining specific contextual input responses of school leaders and how they use the data derived from alumni.

The Poudre School District (PSD) in Fort Collins, Colorado, serves approximately 24,000 students in its 49 schools. As a means of initiating effective communication between alumni and PSD's five high schools, an online survey was constructed and placed on the Internet using SurveyMonkey. com, an online, commercially available web survey supplier (http://www. surveymonkey.com). The online survey consisted of five parts, as defined in Table 1 below. The survey was designed to take between five and ten minutes for the respondent to complete. The context of the questions is listed in Table 1. A total of 22 multiple-choice questions, mostly Likert-scale questions, and nine open-ended questions were used in the five sections. Each question was coded for common themes, using a constant comparative method. Major themes and sub-themes were then developed from the open-ended questions. Open-ended items included the following:

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your communication needs with either your high school or the district?
- Please provide any comments that you feel would enhance your reunion experience.
- Please provide a specific description for those memorable activities from high school.
- Please provide specifics about fond memories about a person from high school.

Data collection and Statistical Analysis Procedures

The PSD Foundation, a private 501(c)(3) organization that raises money to support programs in the school district, funded the survey and provided a listing of PSD alumni names, addresses, and email addresses internal to the foundation. The population sample identified for the survey came from the

Table 1
Structure of Survey Questionnaire

Part	Question Areas	Number and Types of Questions
1	Demographic information: gender, high school, year of graduation, zip code, and offspring in district	3 Multiple-choice questions 2 Open-ended questions
2	Communications: current connection with district, connection with previous high school, desire to be connected, best method of communication (i.e., email, foundation website, postal deliver, phone), and additional comments	5 Multiple-choice questions 1 Open-ended question
3	Alumni activities: aware of alumni events, attendance at alumni event, and what type, request for more alumni events, desire for more campus-specific or district wide activities, additional comments	6 Multiple-choice questions 1 Open-ended question
4	Class reunions: How well informed, attendance at high school reunion, satisfaction with atmosphere at reunion, additional comments	3 Multiple-choice questions 2 Open-ended questions
5	School memories: describe overall high school experience, impact of experience on your life, associate activity with a memorable time, persons associate with fond memories, attachment to a physical object, building, playground, trees	5 Multiple-choice questions 3 Open-ended questions

listing of PSD alumni supplied by the Foundation. Approximately 2,500 PSD alumni were emailed or sent a letter asking them to complete the survey. A total of 333 individuals out of the 2,500 responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 13.3%, an average expected response rate for this type of survey. Responses were collected at the conclusion of the survey in two formats: (1) an HTML summary of the responses and (2) an MS Excel spreadsheet format. The responses were converted to an SPSS format from the MS Excel spreadsheet for quantitative data analysis. In addition, responses to the open-ended questions were transferred into a MS Word document for qualitative analysis using a constant comparative analysis process.

Findings

The typical respondent, identified through the demographic data, was a female, under the age of 45, who graduated in the 1980s or 1990s from one of the three current traditional high schools. The typical respondent still lived in the local community and did not have children currently enrolled in a PSD school. In addition, the respondent was not connected, either formally or informally, with PSD or with her former high school; however, she wanted to be connected with both. As a typical respondent, she preferred to have communication via email and would find information related to her former high school's class reunions, homecoming activities, and staff retirements of interest. She also felt a need to establish communications with other alumni.

Finally, the typical respondent described her high school experience as positive and felt that it had a positive impact on her life. Activities that she recalled as memorable during high school included selected classes and sporting events. Recollections o involvement in music-oriented activities and feels they had a profound influence on her life. Excerpts included:

- "If it wasn't for the music and drama programs I wouldn't have much to say for my HS years! They kept me going and helped me through. The instructors were wonderful and the things I learned there have been applied in other areas and have shaped me as a person."
- "The music groups are excellent at [high school name]. I miss the

time I am able to spend singing."
- "Marching band and symphonic band also kept me connected and involved and probably out of trouble."

She remembered certain classmates, either lifelong friends or a current spouse, as providing positive memories:
- "My best friends I still have today all had positive impacts on my life."
- "My best friend from high school is still a very close friend.
- "My close friends in high school are still my very closest friends.

She also recalled with fondness select administrators, teachers, school staff, and coaches.
- "My band director inspired me to continue with music education in college. I am now a high school band director."
- "My French teacher was very supportive and helpful, especially when I was having personal problems."
- "In sports, the coaches were encouraging and professional. My orchestra instructor continued my appreciation for all types of music."
- "The orchestra director was passionate about music and made class very challenging. He is the reason I am now an orchestra teacher."

Some of the respondents recalled favorable memories of certain physical objects, such as an old high school building with its tower, columns, and gazebo:
- "The grounds are particularly memorable."
- "The old [high school name] building. What a place to have gone to high school. I wouldn't trade it for anything."
- "I attended the old [high school name] and associate that beautiful old building and grounds with my high school experience."
- "The old [high school name] building had a large role in the students attitudes/school spirit."
- "I loved the pillars out front of the old [high school name]. They carried a sense of history."
- The old [high school name] was a magical place. Mysterious,

grand, musty, historical. You could almost feel the ghosts of students who were there before you. Reverence for all its history and spirit was easy to feel."

Discussion

One of the most persistent criticisms of comprehensive high schools is that students find their classes boring and unrelated to their everyday lives or the futures they envision for themselves. This experience fosters apathy, disengagement from school, and contributes to unacceptably high dropout rates (Kotrlik, 2001). Because students' perceptions of their experiences are key indicators of their engagement in school and their learning, schools should be designed to enhance students' feelings of connection.

The data also suggest the following:

1. **Teachers and educators who connect with students are an important part of high school**. All schools need to provide every student with meaningful adult relationships that can best support every student. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2004, p. 5):

   > If high achievement for all students is the goal of reform, then personalization is the key. Although some students might be able to make it through four years of high school despite the lack of any personal connections, all students require a supportive environment—some more than others. Creating that environment is essential to bringing learning to fruition.

   Our data indicate that sometimes those meaningful adult relationships occur outside academic classes, such as with coaches and club sponsors. An effective principal knows the adults who are making positive, meaningful connections with children and supports their work.

2. **Special programs, such as music and sports programs, connect students with schools in ways that academic classes sometimes do not**. In this study, certain classes (24.9% or 214 mentions) and sporting events (24.8% or 213 mentions) led the list of memorable times at their high schools as mentioned by the respondents. The third and fourth largest mention counts were for plays/concerts (16.6% or 143 mentions) and other extracurricular

events (14.6% or 125 mentions). School clubs with 11.8%, 101 mentions, rounds out the top five vote getters. While meaningful to graduates, these special programs may not always garner the respect from the more "academic" areas of high school, especially in this age of increasing accountability for higher test scores. A savvy principal will gather data from alumni to support meaningful programs that may not be as visible in the public eye.

Conclusion

In this study, we found alumni positively connected to certain classes and experiences from high school even after years had passed since graduation. Despite the pressures for high schools to succeed in the race for higher scores and more-qualified graduates, relationships are still the most memorable part of high school. Alumni mentioned relationships with teachers, special programs and even physical objects as being the most memorable part of their school experience. For a school administrator this knowledge is powerful. The implications suggests that if principals understand the power of building relationships while at the same time addressing academics, they will have schools that are positively remembered by their graduates.

With the use of an online survey, principals can gain access to alumni feedback that could have important implications for setting school goals and making resource decisions**.** High-performing schools are analyzing data from assessments and student information systems to adjust curriculum, instruction, and classroom management. Now, with Internet survey access, principals can also access valuable input from their graduates to inform programs. Our data indicated that alumni preferred being contacted for input by email, and Internet survey sites such as *SurveyMonkey.com*, *Zoomerang*, and *Infopoll* offer inexpensive ways to gather and analyze this important feedback. Using this form of online survey with access to alumni experience, principals can gain meaningful information that will be helpful in developing policies and programs that will, more likely, create high school experiences that have positive and lasting impacts on student achievement and their lives in general.

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