

## Senior Survey Initiative

The Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation is partnering with colleges and departments to implement a web-based survey for graduating seniors that incorporates university, college, and department questions. The survey will be presented as an integral step in the degree-check process that all graduating seniors complete. The goals are to:

- 1) increase the response rate
- 2) minimize the number of surveys students are asked to fill out
- 3) increase the likelihood of colleges and departments making use of university-level data
- 4) prompt college- and department- level discussions about what can be learned from their graduating seniors

As at most universities and colleges, UA students participate in institutional surveys at various stages of their academic careers. Although results from these surveys have been available on the web for several years, they receive little attention from colleges and departments, who are primarily interested in the experiences of their own students. Until this year (2002-3), UA's Survey of Graduating Seniors (SGS) was mailed each spring to all students expecting to graduate that year. The response rate, ~35%, was quite good for a mailed survey, certainly adequate for an across-the-board understanding of student responses. But because there might be only a few respondents from any single degree program, there has been little interest in aggregating results by department.

Through being linked to UA's degree-check process, the response rate for the SGS should improve greatly. And since departments can be sure that almost all of their students will respond to the survey, they have a natural interest in the results. Our strategy was to put forward an irresistible offer. We approached each college separately, volunteering to put on the web their college and department surveys along with the university-wide survey, and to return all data to them in a format of their choice.

The advantages of merging university, college, and department questions are obvious. A side effect of the assessment movement sweeping American universities has been that students are barraged with surveys. Last year, a hapless student selected to participate in all the surveys that randomly choose respondents might have received as many as 6 surveys about his/her college experience, many of them covering common ground. (One fears that "survey fatigue" is an imminent danger if not a present reality.) In fact, the development of senior surveys at the college and department level has come largely in the wake of the assessment movement, and many departments have been feeling pressure to develop surveys. By combining department, college, and university questions in one survey, and eliminating question duplications, the number of surveys seniors receive is reduced and the questionnaire is simplified.

As part of the process of collaborating with colleges and departments, we requested input into our university-level questions, offering to streamline them as much as possible and

to replace them with more specific questions where appropriate. Two areas where this process has resulted in positive change are advising and student post- graduation plans. Our previous senior surveys included a sizeable block of questions on advising, but when this data was put forward for use by an advising taskforce, we learned that many colleges didn't find the data usable. Because advising differs greatly from college to college, many colleges felt that the questions weren't well aligned with their services. After consultation with the colleges, we reduced our advising questions to two broad "overall" questions needed for external reporting. Beyond that, we encouraged colleges to develop their own blocs of questions that would be responsive to their needs.

Colleges also differ considerably regarding student post-graduation plans. While some of our questions seemed appropriate to most colleges, many wanted feedback about college-based services of their own. The more professional colleges (e.g. Business, Engineering, Nursing) had unique questions about the job search process. The process of combining surveys opened discussion of the utility of these questions and enabled us hone our surveys at all levels. Colleges and departments differ greatly in what they want to ask graduating seniors. Our College of Engineering and Mines uses a national survey about engineering education (The EBI Engineering Exit Survey), which will be incorporated into or linked, to our university survey. Because the EBI survey is lengthy in its own right, engineering departments have been asked to minimize their department-specific questions. In our College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, a few departments are adding sections relating to department specific learning outcomes. If they find the results useful, other SBS departments are likely to follow suit. The process of merging and consolidating survey questions has already resulted in considerable discussion at the college and department level about what information would be most valuable.

Our on- line survey system should be fully implemented by spring 2003. Triggered by their readiness for a degree check, students will receive an email with a link to the survey. It will be up to the colleges and advisors to ensure student participation. In some colleges, when students complete the survey, they will be directed to print a "receipt" to take to their degree-check advisor. Students who forget to do the survey may be asked to sit down and do it before or after their advisor meetings. At the end of each semester, data will be returned to colleges. Colleges may either analyze their own data or have the analysis done by our office. A few colleges expressed concern about their college- level data being made use of at the university level – our offer to return the data "undigested" assuaged this concern.

We look forward to seeing the data aggregated by colleges and departments and to seeing what use is made of the data. We also look forward to seeing how the surveys evolve as colleges and departments take more interest in them. A common problem at research and other large institutions is that institutional research units are separate from academic departments with few points of connection. Our senior survey initiative brings academic units and institutional research together in a mutually beneficial way.

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