UAO Assessment Æffects

University Assessment Office

Illinois State University **Summer 2002, Vol. 3, No. 1**

Focus on . . . Benchmarking

By Wendy G. Troxel, Coordinator, University Assessment Office

This issue of *Assessment Æffects* addresses ways in which assessment data can be used for purposes of comparative analysis. Assessment at its core is the examination of the gap between "intended" and "actual" . . . and it works for most any type of outcome as long as the objectives are operationalized and the measurements yield useful results. As we continue to analyze the projects undertaken to solicit input from our students about their academic experiences, our goal is to propose a systematic plan for future years that will maximize the amount and type of information gathered about our students, while minimizing the redundancies of multiple measures. A final plan will be proposed by the members of the *Educating ILLINOIS* subcommittee addressing Action Item 16A. If you are interested in participating in the project, please contact me at wgtroxe@ilstu.edu.

Introduction of New Staff at UAO

Jerry Manahan was hired as a part-time Research Assistant in the UAO in March, 2002. He is involved in faculty development activities in the area of measurement and evaluation (psychometrics, test design, and analysis) and will assist Opscan Evaluation in their services to faculty. He also assists in the analysis of institution-wide data from and about student learning and development.

Jerry received his B. S., M. S. and Doctorate of Arts degrees from Illinois State University and continued his studies in business at the University of Texas at Austin. He has taught business and economics courses at several universities including Illinois State. He has several publications in economics and economic education and continues to conduct research on teaching effectiveness.

Ernestine "Chris" Jackson joined the UAO staff on July 9, 2001. Chris came to the UAO from Special Olympics Illinois. She brings to us her expertise in word processing, desk top publishing, accounting, and other professional skills.

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The Power of Benchmarking

By Glenn Detrick and Joseph Pica, Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI)

Since the inception of the total quality management (TQM) movement, the power of comparative assessment, specifically benchmarking, has been well documented in the private sector. Only recently, with the introduction of high quality national benchmarking studies, have institutions in higher education begun to recognize the value of benchmarking as an assessment methodology to support introspection, strategic planning and continuous improvement initiatives.

While there are many approaches to benchmarking, we will focus our attention here on studies that assess stakeholder perceptions of quality. The principles of stakeholder benchmarking studies are well suited to assist colleges and universities in the development of a comprehensive, long-term assessment strategy. Stakeholder benchmarking is effective because it addresses two aspects essential to the continuous quality improvement process. Benchmarking is effective because it is a powerful tool for (1) identifying the factors most important for improving quality and (2) initiating and sustaining the process of change essential for continuous quality improvement.

Why Benchmarking is a Powerful Continuous Quality Improvement Tool

It Assesses What is Most Important: Successful benchmarking assessment studies evaluate the degree to which an organization is successfully fulfilling its mission from the perspective of key stakeholders. If you believe in the old adage "you get what you measure," it is essential assessment studies focus on mission critical factors. A successful benchmarking study will identify and assess the factors critical to the successful fulfillment of the mission. The contents of the studies are determined by experts who assure the instruments capture the factors essential to the mission of the discipline. Quality benchmarking studies measure mission critical factors.

It Challenges Long Held Beliefs: Benchmarking studies provide a comprehensive internal and comparative evaluation of performance serving to identify strengths and weaknesses. Educators (and others as well) have a tendency to overestimate their strengths and underestimate their weaknesses (evidenced by the 50 or so schools who contend to be in the "top 20" of any rankings). Little progress can be made when performance evaluation is left to a debate based solely on experience and anecdotal evidence.

Benchmarking studies can provide comprehensive, credible results to guide and motivate those in a position to have the greatest impact on quality improvement. When professionals review benchmarking results, inevitably two types of conclusions are reached. First, a good percentage of the results reinforce what professionals already believe, based on their previous education, training and experience in the field. This falls under the category of "we knew this all along." This is to be expected from professionals who have years of experiences. The difference is that now there is credible, comprehensive, comparable evidence to support what was previously opinion or supposition.

Second, professionals are inevitably presented with results that challenge their long-held beliefs. These results are typically questioned because the evidence is contrary to long held assumptions. Once the credibility of the results has been established, professionals face the challenge of integrating the new information into their overall view of performance. These results typically have the greatest impact on the improvement process. Credible results provide evidence for professionals to rethink their assumptions about strengths and weaknesses. It requires them to incorporate new insights into a revised perspective of problems and opportunities. Benchmarking results challenge previously held beliefs and challenge professionals to address the issues most critical to improved efficiency and effectiveness.

It Informs Decision-Making: Few organizations have unlimited resources to invest in all aspects of their operation. Each year educators are faced with making resource allocation decisions that will result in the accomplishment of their mission. One of the major barriers to change is the inability of managers to shift resources from historically established budget lines. Stakeholder benchmarking studies can provide information that details the level of performance as well as the importance of factors to stakeholders perception of quality. Identifying low performance factors that have great impact on perceived quality allows managers to focus their attention and deploy their resources in the most efficient and effective manner. It prioritizes for the decision-maker where an investment of resources will have the greatest impact on improving performance in the eyes of key stakeholders.

It is essential to understand (1) areas of strength and weakness and (2) the importance of the factors to overall satisfaction of stakeholders. For example, the factor with the lowest performance score may not be the factor that is most important to constituents' overall satisfaction. By identifying the factors that are predictors of overall satisfaction in order of importance, educators are able to identify exactly where their resources will have the most positive impact on

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performance. Simply stated, it is possible for benchmarking studies to identify where managers should invest their resources to have the greatest positive impact on performance. Solid evidence of performance and identifying which factors are important for improving quality provide managers with the evidence they need to shift resources.

It Motivates Staff: Even the most well-intentioned faculty and administrators become frustrated and discouraged when they receive no feedback regarding the impact of their efforts. Benchmarking motivates staff in four ways:

1. **Reinforce Performance:** Evidence of good performance is an opportunity to congratulate and reward staff for a job well done, serving to reinforce and motivate staff to maintain and improve performance.

2. **Identify mission critical factors essential for quality improvement:** Provide staff with evidence of where their efforts will have the greatest positive impact on improving performance. Benchmarking results identify for staff the areas that are most important for improving overall performance on mission critical factors. Identifying areas where the performance is below that of peers/competitors has the effect of challenging the staff to improve performance by tapping into their natural competitive nature.

3. **The power of comparisons:** Comparative results with selected peers remove all doubt that it "can't be done by anyone else better than we are doing it." With evidence that others perform at a higher level, staff rise to the challenge and commit themselves to improvement.

4. **The power of continuous assessment:** With a continuous benchmarking process, staff members come to know what needs to be improved -- and they know how and when their performance will be assessed again. Knowing performance will be measured and evaluated over time has proven to be a powerful motivator.

The Essentials of Benchmarking

Benchmarking takes many forms and has been associated with many processes. From our experience, the following are essential to successful benchmarking studies. Studies must be:

Credible: Studies must be designed to gather feedback on those aspects of the program that are directly related to the successful fulfillment of the organization's mission. In other words, measures of stakeholders' perceptions, resource allocations, or other performance measures that are critical to success. Most importantly, respected professionals from the field must be involved in the development of the content of the study. The statistical reliability and validity should far exceed the minimum standards recognized by academics for statistically sound studies. Studies conducted by external organizations increase credibility.

Comparative: National survey instruments assure comparability of results across the profession. Comparison with a small set of peers selected by participating institutions is essential for providing valid benchmarks for performance. Comparisons that only provide national standards or comparisons with predetermined groups do not provide the benchmarks necessary to most accurately evaluate performance. Studies must either include only schools who see themselves as peers or they must allow each participating school to select the schools to be included in their results analysis to assure comparisons are relevant.

Confidential: There are two levels of confidentiality, one to protect the identity of the participants and the other to assure that results are not used to the disadvantage of any participating institution. Based on the scope and breadth of the study, each benchmarking group must determine the importance of confidentiality. The criteria for establishing the levels of confidentially are based on the legality of sharing the information, the trust among the participants, the sensitivity of the data, and the ultimate use of the data once the results are distributed to the participants. One of the most important issues is whether the results can be publicly released, allowing the participants to indicate their performance is better than their peers/competitors, individually or as a group.

Comprehensive: The data from benchmarking studies should be analyzed to provide summaries that identify areas of strength and weakness in a variety of ways. Descriptive and prescriptive statistical analyses should be provided to identify statistical difference between means and factors that are most critical to overall satisfaction. The results should be designed to provide decision-makers with the information they need to more effectively deploy resources and alter processes directly related to quality improvement.

Continuous: Individual institutional results should be analyzed longitudinally to provide a comprehensive picture of the success of change initiatives and overall progress over time. Longitudinal analysis allows institutions to evaluate changes each year that result in improvements in performance. Longitudinal analysis provides the feedback to continually evaluate initiatives implemented to improve quality. This iterative cycle of initiating changes and evaluating performance results is central to the continuous quality improvement process.

Reprinted with permission from the Policy Center on the First Year of College, Brevard, NC, June 22, 2000.

The Toolbox Series: Using Multiple Methodologies

By Jamie Young, Research Associate, UAO

Often times when people think about developing an assessment plan, they consider doing a survey. Although a survey can be an effective tool for gathering assessment information, it is not the only method available. There are many methodologies that people are not aware of or do not take the time to consider. Choosing the appropriate assessment methodology depends on the question at hand and what you intend to do with the information that you obtain as a result. What is often overlooked, is the power of using multiple methodologies.

Assessment questions can be complex. For this reason, it can be helpful to use multiple methodologies whenever possible. In their book Assessment in Student Affairs, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) argue that assessment is more powerful when multiple methodologies are used, particularly when both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. The AAHE Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning state that assessment questions can be best understood by "employing a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees of integration."

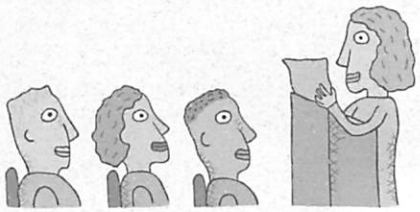
Approaching assessment questions with multiple methodologies allows you to obtain a more complete picture of the research question. Suppose you were interested in determining whether or not students improved stress management skills as a result of an educational program. A number of methodologies could be used to approach this question. A form given out at the session could be used to obtain demographic information and initial stress management skills, a follow-up survey could assess changes in stress management skills, and focus groups could gain insight into stress management development. The use of multiple methodologies could provide a more complete picture.

Surveys and focus groups are not the only methods available for gathering evidence of impact. Look for future editions of "The Toolbox Series" to focus on different methodologies or "tools" that you can use in your own assessment work.

Upcoming Conferences

PBL 2002: A Pathway to Better Learning, International conference on problem-based learning in higher education
June 16-20, 2002
Baltimore, MD

AAHE Assessment Conference
June 19-22, 2002
Boston, MA



"Working to Connect Student Learning to Teaching, Assessment & Curriculum? What's your Next Step?"
Alverno College Institute
June 24-28, 2002
Milwaukee, WI

For more details and other events, visit the UAO website at *http://www.assessment.ilstu.edu/* and click on **"Upcoming National Conferences"**

Involving Students in Assessment and Change

By Beni Towers, UAO Graduate Practicum Student (Educational Administration and Foundations)

Over the past seven years, the UAO has been systematically administering institution-wide surveys to our students at various points in their academic career. Efforts have been made to report these data to faculty and staff to help them learn more about their students and to help them enhance student learning. While thousands of Illinois State students complete the surveys each year, the data sit unreported to them, full of potential for change. Deciding how to best report survey data to students and help them to effectively use it was the task involved in the Student Survey Dissemination Project.

In creating a systematic dissemination plan for survey results, the UAO hopes to accomplish several goals. First, the project is a direct response to Action Item 16 from Educating Illinois, which directs the University to solicit input from students about their educational experiences and to use the data to help students succeed. In addition, students could use the data as a personal measure of behavior and beliefs, or as a resource to request change on campus. For example, according to the 2001 National Survey of Student Engagement, 41% of our freshmen make class presentations "often" or "very often"; this compares with only 26% of freshmen at like institutions. This kind of information is helpful for students to know, because it can get them to think about the types of active learning experiences that they have had or want to have while in college. Knowing how Illinois State compares with like

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institutions can give students a sense of pride in their college experience and also spur them to think about marketable skills they are gaining that peers at other institutions may not be getting. Finally, getting the word out about results such as this can generate interest in the surveys and increase student response rates for future surveys as well.

The Student Survey Dissemination Project was carefully planned and developed over several months. The first step was to determine if students actually wanted to receive the results, or simply, did they care? Three student focus groups were conducted to generate feedback on the idea, and to find out which methods should be used to disseminate the data. Meetings were also held with the UAO staff and several University representatives from departments to hear their input. Using the information gathered in these focus groups and meetings, it was determined that many students were interested in the data. The majority of the students we talked to were very excited to learn that these data existed. One student summed it up nicely by saying that the survey results were "something that you didn't know you wanted to know until you saw them". Through these focus groups, we also discovered that there was not a single most effective method to disseminate data since students all prefer to consume information differently. An action plan was developed to decide which methods would be the focus of the project.

> ***The survey results were "something that you didn't know you wanted to know until you saw them."***
>
> ***— ISU Student***

First, articles will be included in several newsletters that are sent out from the Office of Student Life to different student populations. Themed packets of information will also be compiled for use when a student, administrator, or faculty member requests information from student surveys. For example, the UCLA is looking to use study habit and time management data in their workshops and trainings. In addition, UAO is considering distribution of survey data through the Vidette, the university web site, table tents in dining halls, and posters.

The UAO is hopeful that the Student Survey Dissemination Project will significantly impact the way that survey data are used at Illinois State. Having students involved in the assessment process, could be a very positive and unique progression for our campus. Disseminating data to students is not a widespread practice in higher education, and Illinois State could be a pioneer in this area.

An Update on NSSE and YFCY

by Jamie Young, Research Associate, UAO

Last spring, Illinois State was a participant in two national pilot surveys: The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Your First College Year Survey (YFCY). Over the past year, UAO has made a concerted effort to determine how to best utilize and disseminate the data that we collect from our students. By participating in these two pilot projects, we intend to analyze the comparative value of these instruments. Below is a description of these two instruments. This newsletter also provides highlights of some of the exciting information gleaned from the results (see page 6).

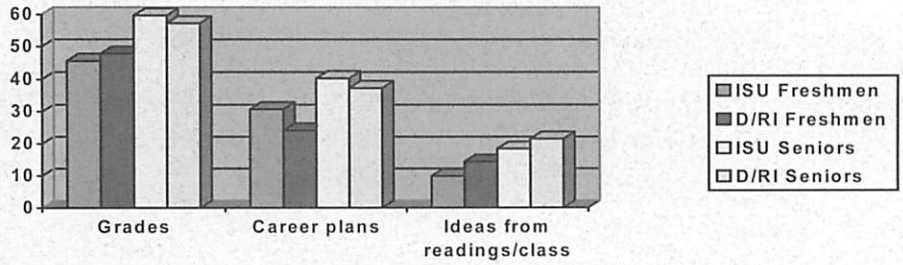
The **"NSSE"** is a project supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts and is under the direction of George Kuh at Indiana University. The main objective of this survey is to gather information to assess the extent to which students are participating in educational practices that are strongly related to high levels of learning and development. Illinois State as well as 320 other colleges and universities participated in the spring 2001 administration. Five hundred freshmen and 500 seniors were given the opportunity to complete this survey at our institution, and were given the option of completing the survey either on paper or via the web. Illinois State had a response rate of 38% compared to the national response rate of 42%. A total of 88 students completed the web version and 285 completed the paper version. Illinois State is currently participating in the Spring 2002 administration and has doubled the sample size (1000 freshmen, 1000 seniors). Results should be available in late summer.

The **Your First College Year Survey (YFCY)** is sponsored by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA and the Policy Center on the First Year of College. This survey is designed as a follow-up to the CIRP entering freshmen survey (Illinois State has participated in this survey since 1995) to assess change and development during the first year of college. Illinois State, along with 56 other two- and four- year institutions, participated in this survey during the spring of 2001. Illinois State randomly sampled a total of 500 freshmen and had a response rate of approximately 21.4% (nationwide was 21.6%). A total of 104 students responded to this survey and it should be noted that these same students completed the CIRP survey during their freshmen year allowing for useful matched-pair analysis.

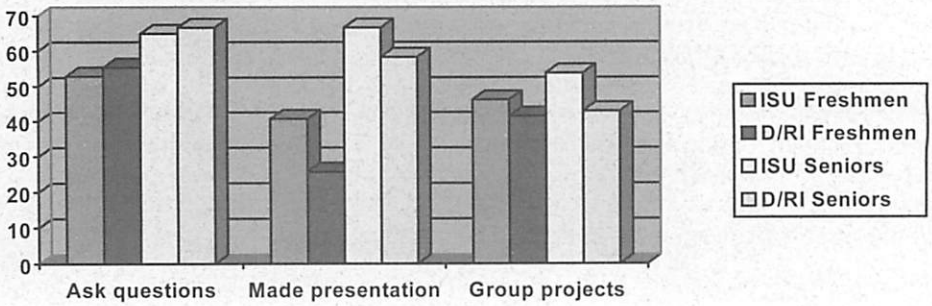
Selected Responses from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2001

*compared with freshmen & seniors from other "Doctoral/Research Intensive" institutions – D/RI

Students who report talking "very often or often" with faculty about . . .



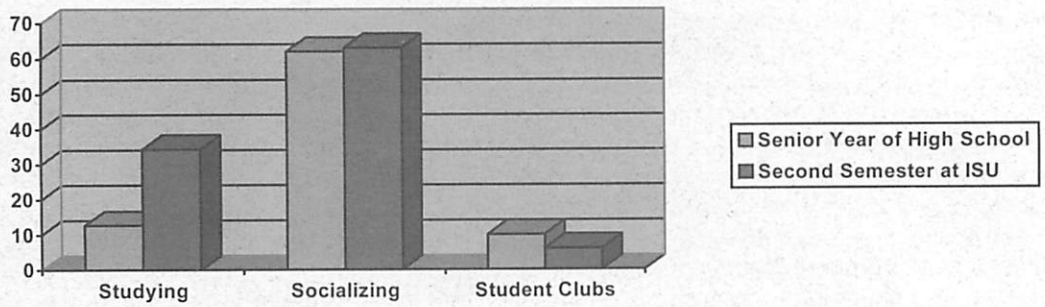
Students who report engaging in activities "very often or often" during class . . .



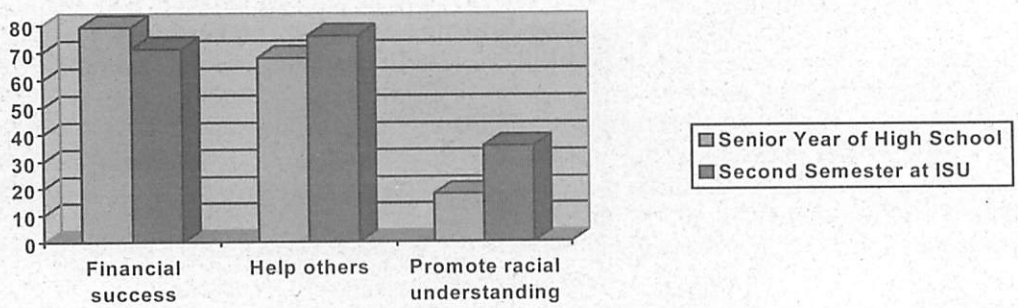
Selected Responses from the Your First College Year Survey (YFCY) *2001*

*cohort compared with CIRP responses as entering freshmen during Preview 2000

Students who spend 11 or more hours per week on the following activities . . .



Students who report that the following are "very important or essential" life goals



Outcome Assessment Panel Study: 2000 Graduates Have Much To Say

By Deborah Gentry, Associate Dean for Research, College of Applied Science and Technology (CAST)

In the spring of 2000, nearly 90 students about to graduate with undergraduate degrees from CAST programs of study agreed to participate in a longitudinal panel study to assess various outcomes of their academic preparation. These students were asked to complete an online survey in early June, 2001. In addition to completing this survey at the 1-year post-graduation mark, they will also be asked to complete a similar survey upon the 3-year and 5-year anniversaries of their graduation. What follows below are highlights from the results of the survey conducted last June.

- Seventy-five (75) percent of the panelists were employed in the field, or a related field, they prepared for while studying at Illinois State University. Of those who were not employed in their field of study, 6 attended graduate school full-time, 6 found the salaries in the field too low, 1 was no longer interested in the field, 1 perceived s/he was ill-prepared to proceed in the field, 1 did not desire to relocate in order to find a position in the field, 3 were not seeking such employment, and 4 indicated hiring freezes had presented a barrier to them.
- Forty-nine (49) percent had been hired in their first professional position at the time they graduated, 88% had such a position within three months of graduating, and 97% had such a position within 6 months of graduating. Sixty-four (64) percent are still employed in this first position.
- Among the position titles held by these panelists were consultant, logistic coordinator, sales assistant, design engineer, medical technologist, soil conservationist, teacher, technical analyst, web developer, farm manager, systems analyst, junior programmer, rehabilitation technician, district manager, personal trainer, fitness trainer, compliance officer, underwriter, interior designer, nutrition technician, director of animal health, print service coordinator, marketing manager, and accountant.
- Ninety-four (94) percent perceived they are as well prepared, or even better prepared, than colleagues of their same status who graduated from other institutions of higher education.
- Seventy-five (75) and sixty-two (62) percent, respectively, attributed their current sense of on-the-job competence to knowledge and skills specifically learned in courses within their major or to knowledge and skills they learned at ISU related to critical thinking.
- Fifty-nine (59) percent have advanced their careers by taking advanced training, while 25% have engaged in graduate coursework.
- Twenty-five (25) percent have already sought a promotion during this first year of employment. Of those who have taken this step, most attributed their success in eventually receiving such a promotion to their high quality performance on the job.
- Fifty-nine (59) percent have received up to two pay raises in their first year of post-graduation employment.
- Fifty-two (52) percent reported earning up to $29,000/year, while 23% earn $30-39,000/year, 13% earn $40-49,000/year, and 12% earn more than $50,000/year.
- Seventy-nine (79) percent perceived the academic preparation they received from courses in their major has been highly to extremely valuable to them, both professionally and personally.

Another cohort of panelists graduating in May, 2001, have been identified. They will be contacted several months from now, in mid-May or early June, and asked to complete the same online survey. Likewise, a new cohort of panelists graduating this May, 2002, will sign on as participants in this study. As data accumulates, comparisons within and between cohorts will be made.

For this longitudinal study to be successful, it is important for current panelists to inform the CAST Dean's Office of changes in residential address, e-mail address, and other relevant information. Participants in the study provide such updates through direct contact with the Dean's office, or by visiting a website devoted to the project.

Free Assessment Workshops Available to You!

Check the UAO website for updates and revisions: ***http://www.assessment.ilstu.edu***

Please contact the UAO if you are interested in having our staff customize a workshop for your Department, College, or Unit on one of the following topics:

- Classroom Action Research
- Classroom Assessment Techniques
- Curricular Mapping for Program Assessment
- Research Methodologies for Assessment
- Analyzing Test Results
- TracDat Assessment Software (Data Management System)

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