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*When metropolitan university leaders speak about serving the entire metropolitan area, they often refer to the rural fringes as well as concentrated urban populations. Working with rural communities requires somewhat different approaches to planning programs and understanding needs. Survey research helps the campus understand the perceptions and realities of community educational needs, and also helps to cement university-town relationships.*

## **Taking the Metropolitan University to a Rural Community: The Role of a Needs Assessment Survey**

Our world is experiencing increasing cultural diversity, rapid demographic shifts, increasing global interdependence, and exploding technological advances. These trends have influenced, and will continue to influence, higher education well into the next century. As a result, universities are challenged to meet the need for access to quality education among an increasingly more diverse student population in very different ways than in the past. One institutional means of facilitating access to higher education is the development of different outreach, distance learning, and extended programs that serve students in new places using new modes of delivery.

Public universities are in the forefront of extended instructional programs because of the lead taken by the land grant models and of the common public mission of serving the broader community. Among those programs designed to extend the university into outlying communities, providing access to education in underserved areas is an important goal.

Contrary to the belief that urban and metropolitan universities' primary goal is to serve a concentrated urban population, many are also regional universities that are expected to reach a population dispersed throughout and beyond the metropolitan region, even into its rural fringes. These institutions face unique challenges in designing a full-fledged program with in-house facilities in diverse locations. The challenge in rural areas stems from two interrelated sources: (1) assessing the real demand of the rural community for extended programs, and (2) designing and implementing

programs that incorporate the needs of such communities within a reasonable time period. At a practical level, getting access to the rural community and receiving its feedback often becomes a challenging task. At a later stage, developing programs based on such feedback can be a lengthy process because of the bureaucratic inertia imbedded in most higher educational institutions.

Needs assessment surveys continue to be the basic instrument that universities use to assess different constituents' needs and demands. "Needs assessment is the systematic and ongoing process of providing usable and useful information about the needs of the target population to those who can and will utilize it to make judgments about policy and programs" (Reviere and Berkowitz, 1996, p. 203). These surveys are basically tools used by a variety of organizations and social scientists with differing needs for information (York, 1982).

This article is based on a needs assessment survey conducted by Northern Kentucky University (NKU), a Midwestern metropolitan state university, in its effort to respond to the educational needs of a rural community (henceforth referred as County X). It delineates the process, key findings, and the implications of such findings. With a student population of around 12,000 and located in a sprawling urban area, NKU serves urban communities that are surrounded by mostly rural counties that are being rapidly developed and seem destined to be captured by urban sprawl, presenting immediate challenges to the metropolitan university. Located in the central section of the state, County X covers a total land area of 259 square miles approximately 50 miles from NKU, with an estimated population of 16,896 in 1992. Predominantly rural in nature, the per capita personal income of the county was \$14,076 in 1992, and in 1994 its total number of employed residents averaged 7,693 (mostly in wholesale and retail trade). In terms of population, County X is said to be the third fastest growing county in the state. As a result, it has entered into a period of rapid growth in housing; currently twenty new developments, with 2000 family units, are full or rapidly filling.

### ***The Needs Assessment Survey: Origin and Process***

The idea of conducting a needs assessment survey to verify regional demand for access to higher education originated in one of the sessions that the new president of NKU held in County X while touring the metropolitan region, during which community leaders strongly emphasized the need for NKU to offer local freshman-level courses in their county to ease transition to college. They expressed concern about the low number of high school graduates going to college because of the lack of nearby higher education programs, students' reluctance to attend an "urban" school, and the inconvenience of students commuting to NKU because of transportation and scheduling. They saw their community, economy, and jobs changing and wanted their local youths to be well-prepared for a new environment. However, they were also concerned that students saw college as an impersonal, large, and daunting experience, and suggested that first year programming, delivered locally, might build student confidence and success.

On the basis of such feedback, the president of NKU formed an internal steering committee with the task of considering the feasibility of action. The committee, composed of top level administrators of the university, was asked to act promptly with the target of deciding whether or not to offer a freshman-level curriculum in county X in

the upcoming fall. One component of the action plan developed by this committee was to conduct a needs assessment survey to determine the feasibility of operating a full-fledged freshman level college program in the county.

The survey was carried out with three broad objectives:

1. Verifying the demand for NKU-offered freshman-level college courses on a regular basis in County X,
2. Specifying the nature of the various dimensions of such a demand, and
3. Identifying important demographic factors that might explain the reasons for and nature of the demand.

Involving the community as an important participant was a very important consideration in the design and administration of the survey because it was eagerly waiting for the results. The community also formed a steering committee (composed of local representatives of various interested groups) to assist the university in the planning process, and the researcher attended two of the early meetings held between the community steering committee and the university's advisory committee, all of which were held in County X, to explain the process and purposes of the survey. Even though County X was only 50 miles away from the urban center, the community was predominantly rural in nature. The researcher encountered a highly enthusiastic and supportive group in those meetings who eagerly offered voluntary assistance in the administration of the survey.

After pretesting, the final questionnaire was distributed in separate phases to two groups of potential clients/interested groups: (1) high school seniors and juniors in County X, and (2) the broader community. In phase I, the instrument was administered to the seniors and juniors of the two high schools in County X, with the assistance of the schools' counselors and teachers, which was another means of enhancing the sense of involvement of the community. In this phase, a total of 328 students were asked to complete the survey in class and return it to their teachers.

In phase II, a slightly different questionnaire was distributed to households in and around the county. Questions focusing on respondents' high schools, GPA, and ACT scores were omitted from this questionnaire sent to the broader community, but included items focusing on respondents' employment status that were not part of the student survey. In other words, this questionnaire was tailored to make the questions more relevant to the broader community, which was distributed through the locally subscribed newspaper and a weekly advertisement newsletter. This medium of reaching the community was used because: (1) the editor of the newspaper volunteered to distribute the surveys as inserts in his newspaper, and (2) it was used as an avenue to enhance the community's sense of participation in the process and was an easy method to access the entire community. A few days before the surveys were distributed, the newspaper ran editorials informing the community that there would be an upcoming inclusion of the surveys.

The total number of returns was 670, a low return rate that did not match the enthusiasm the community showed in meetings. This low return rate from the broader community can probably be attributed to the fact that many of the households receiving the survey thought it unnecessary to complete it because their children were grown

or because the recipients were elderly. Therefore, only those individuals who were most interested in enrolling in such a program may have felt the motivation to complete and return the survey.

The rural background of the community might have been another factor. In fact, one of the concerns raised by community leaders during the meetings was that the lower educational status of the broader community might be a possible barrier to getting effective participation. Therefore, unfamiliarity with survey instruments may have also played a role in the return rate.

### ***Key Findings and Analysis***

*Assessment of the demand.* In order to assess the respondents' (both groups) demand for and interest in freshman level courses in County X, responses were sought on the following items:

1. Importance of a college education
2. Highest level of education expected to complete
3. Likelihood of going to college in the next one to three years
4. Interest in NKU offered courses in County X, and
5. Important factors in choosing a college

Analysis of the responses showed that 84.5% of the students and 96.1% of the respondents from the broader community thought that college education was important to them. A total of 52.3% of the students expected to complete at least a bachelor's degree, while 11.8% and 9.3% of the students surveyed expected to complete an associate degree or a vocational degree, respectively. However, in regard to going to college in the next one to three years, a total of 79.8% of the students chose "very likely" and "somewhat likely" responses.

Among the respondents from the broader community, 49.3% of the respondents expected to complete at least a bachelor's degree, while 28.6% and 8.7% expected to complete an associate degree or a vocational/technical degree, respectively. A total of 70.1% of this group thought it either "very likely" or at least "somewhat likely" that they would go to college in the next one to three years. Thirty-four percent of the students and 53% of the respondents in the broader community expressed strong interest in enrolling in NKU-offered courses in their county. Another 25.5% of the students and 14.4% of the respondents in the broader community were somewhat interested in enrolling in such a program.

Location of the college (being close to home) was considered a very important factor by 44.1% of the students and 82.3% of the respondents in the broader community.

*Specific nature of the demand.* The survey asked a variety of questions to assess the different dimensions of any demand that might exist for NKU-offered courses in County X. Questions were geared to understand respondents' preferences for class days, hours, time period, course delivery systems, area of study, and parttime or fulltime status. These data are essential to assessing feasibility, facilitating planning, and bringing institutional and community expectations into alignment.

Among the student respondents there was a very strong preference (64.7%) for the 9 a.m.–12 noon class periods. As expected, the late afternoon and evening time peri-

ods showed a consistently low preference among the students. Only 8.1% of the students preferred the 6-9 p.m. time period. Among the respondents in the broader community, there was an almost equal level of preference for the morning (9 a.m.–12 noon) and evening (6-9 p.m.) class periods. The former was preferred by 42.6% of the respondents and the latter by 45.1% of the respondents.

The traditional classroom with an onsite instructor was the predominant choice among the respondents, with 57.1% of the students and 84.2% of the community group ranking it as their first choice. In contrast, 21.1% of the students and 11.3% of the respondents from the broader community picked the Internet as their first choice of course delivery methods. Both groups also preferred weekday classes: 80.1% of the students and 77.6% of the respondents in the broader community. Over one-fourth of the latter group preferred Saturday classes, in contrast to 6.3% of the student respondents.

As for frequency of class meetings, the highest preference (34.8%) among the students was for twice a week (one hour and fifteen minutes) meetings. The next preference (21.9%) was for meeting three times a week for fifty minutes. Only 14.4% of the students preferred to meet once a week for three hours. In the broader community, a different pattern of preference was identified: 42.5% of the respondents in this group preferred to meet once a week for three hours. However, another 35.6% of this group preferred to meet twice a week for one hour and fifteen minutes, and only 8.2% of this group said that they would prefer to meet three times a week for fifty minutes.

For both groups, business administration was the modal answer for preferred area of study, with computer science emerging as the second highest preferred area. For both groups, the third ranked area of study was education. One of the interesting findings was that most of the respondents in both groups preferred to go to college as parttime students. This was somewhat surprising, since we had expectations that at least the traditional age students would prefer fulltime status. However, while 79.6% (a predominant majority) of the respondents in the broader community preferred parttime status, this was preferred by only 54.1% of the student respondents.

*Preparedness and nature of assistance needed.* ACT scores were one of the indicators that this survey used to assess students' preparedness to go to college. However, the survey found that only 27.5% of the students who were very interested in enrolling in NKU-offered courses in their county had taken the ACT. Obviously, a significant majority (72.5%) of this group had not yet taken the ACT.

Financial assistance for going to college was a predominant need among both groups of respondents. Eighty-four and one-half percent of the students and 92.5% of the respondents in the broader community listed this as their primary reason. In the latter group, 22.4% of the respondents marked child care assistance as a need.

*Importance of demographics.* Different demographic factors were cross-tabulated with degree of interest for higher education. Appropriate measures of association (gamma, lambda) were calculated. The survey found no significant differences (lambda = .09) between the genders in degree of interest in higher education. Household income was also not a factor affecting the student respondents' degree of interest in higher education and in enrolling in courses in County X. However, income had some relationship (although a weak one) with the degree of interest in such a program among the respondents in the broader community (gamma = .23).

Among the respondents in the broader community, degree of interest in enrolling in college courses in County X did not vary significantly with changes in employment status (e.g., part/fulltime status).

### ***Implications***

As public universities increase their efforts to reach the distant community through different extension and virtual learning programs, this particular study has several relevant findings for such attempts:

- One of the important findings of the study relates to the mode of course delivery systems. Even though distance learning programs are gaining prominence, this particular needs assessment survey shows a preponderant preference for traditional classrooms with instructors, especially among the broader community. Interestingly, a majority of the high school seniors and juniors also picked it as their first choice. This finding provides several insights into the current growth and use of distance learning. First, it may be a reflection of the effects of unfamiliarity with distance learning among a predominantly rural community. Second, it might actually reflect the preference of a community for the personal touch and interaction with classroom instructors, given their concern that a distant urban campus is seen as large and unfamiliar. Nonetheless, this finding strongly indicates the importance of taking contextual factors into consideration in designing distance learning programs.
- Surprisingly, there is an almost equal level (42.6% and 45.1%) of preference for the morning (9 a.m.-12 noon), and the evening (6– 9 p.m.) classtime periods among the respondents from the broader community. This is in contrast to a perception that the “nontraditional” or adult group would prefer evening classes. The correlation with employment status and preference for classtime periods gives further insights on these findings, because it shows that 33.7% of fulltime job holders prefer the 9 a.m.–12 noon classtime period, in contrast to 54.5% of the parttime job holders and 56.9% of the unemployed respondents.

Among the high school students, there is a very strong preference (64.7%) for morning sessions. The study also found some differences among the groups regarding preference for frequencies of class meetings that point out the probable difficulties of scheduling classes to adjust to the preferences of the two groups of potential students in this particular community region.

- A similar finding relates to preferences for class days. Both groups strongly prefer weekday classes.
- Another interesting finding is that most of the respondents in both groups prefer to go to college as parttime students. For the respondents in the broader community, this was somewhat expected; however, for the high school students the expectation was that most would

prefer to take fulltime classes. The preference of the latter group for parttime courses may be a reflection of their lower income status or their lack of confidence about attending college in a distant location.

- The survey also revealed significant information about students' preparedness for going to college, in that it showed that a large majority of the students who were "very interested" in going to college had not yet taken the ACT. This points out the importance of effective advising and wide-scale publicity of the requirements of college admission.
- The ways in which the survey was administered shed some important lights on the dilemma of efficiency versus effectiveness that most if not all large bureaucracies face. The survey was completed within a very short time frame. If done with more time and with follow-up letters, the return rate might have been more impressive. However, such effectiveness might also have overshadowed the importance of offering the new program promptly.

The university was able to use its findings in designing and ultimately in offering a full-fledged freshman level curriculum in the county the next fall (as targeted). It was thus an exemplary case of breaking bureaucratic inefficiency by planning and implementing a program within an interval of eight months. On the basis of these findings, the university is currently offering eight courses, four in the daytime and four in the evenings, in County X. The total number of seats occupied in the daytime courses is 52, and 50 in the evening courses. Enrollment for spring exceeded 160.

### Conclusion

As universities and colleges design programs to accommodate the needs of both traditional and nontraditional students, it should be noted that this study finds no major differences between these two groups in preferences for area of study, class schedule, mode of learning, and student status when planning a localized program remote from the main campus. In fact, the study found that the nontraditional group's preferences are similar to those of the traditional students. As universities are going through a wave of innovation and reforms to serve the needs of multiple and distant constituents, these findings point to the importance of conducting participatory needs assessment surveys to determine the changing demands of an increasingly diverse student population.

### *Suggested Readings*

- Reviere, R., and S. Berkowitz, "Building for Future Needs Assessments," In *Needs Assessment: A Creative & Practical Guide for Social Scientists*, ed. R. Reviere, S. Berkowitz., C. C. Carter, and C. G. Ferguson (Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis, 1996).
- York, R. O., *Human Service Planning: Concepts, Tools, and Methods* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

## **Metropolitan Universities: Who Are We?**

**We are** located in or near the urban center of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) with a population of at least 250,000.

**We are** universities, public and private, whose mission includes teaching, research, and professional service. We offer both graduate and undergraduate education in the liberal arts and two or more professional fields. The latter programs are strongly practice-oriented and make extensive use of clinical sites in the metropolitan area.

**The majority of our students** come from our metropolitan regions. Our students are highly diverse in age, ethnic and racial identity, and socioeconomic background, reflecting the demographic characteristics of their region. Many come to us by transfer from community colleges and other baccalaureate institutions, many are place-bound employees and commuters, and many require substantially longer than the traditional time to graduate, for financial and other personal reasons.

**We are** oriented toward and identify with our regions, proudly and by deliberate design. Our programs respond to regional needs while striving for national excellence.

**We are** strongly interactive. We are dedicated to serving as intellectual and creative resources to our metropolitan regions in order to contribute to their economic development, social health, and cultural vitality, through education, research, and professional outreach. We are committed to collaboration and cooperation with the many communities and clienteles in our metropolitan regions and to helping to bridge the socioeconomic, cultural, and political barriers among them.

**We are** shaping and adapting our own structures, policies, and practices to enhance our effectiveness as key institutions in the lives of our metropolitan regions and their citizens.

