

By Rebecca Patrick

SURVEY SAYS

Campuses Reach Out for Alumni Feedback

Seek and you shall find. That's the simple yet empowering approach Purdue University took in 2014 when it set out to discover how its alumni were doing. More specifically, the goal was to identify the link between key college experiences and positive outcomes long after graduation.

Purdue – with funding from the Lumina Foundation – collaborated with nationally-known Gallup in what became the Gallup-Purdue Index, which also revealed how Boilermaker alums fared in relation to their U.S. counterparts. They repeated the process in 2015.

"We learned, not to skip the obvious, that Purdue has done a great job over time. Our graduates are succeeding not just financially, but (also) in other realms of well-being much more than the average college graduate – say nothing of people who didn't get to go. But we also learned, as we wanted, about things we could do better," acknowledges Purdue President Mitch Daniels.

"One that's already been translated is that our faculty must embrace, every one of them must embrace, the responsibility to personally coach and advise and mentor students. So that's now written into our tenure and promotion policy. Don't expect lifelong tenure at Purdue if you can't make some showing that you did something to

invest yourself in the success of your students."

The process undertaken at Purdue would make an impression. The Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE) decided this research method could be used across the state to help validate the importance of a college degree.

"What the Gallup-Purdue Index did is say there are things about the college experience that we know have value beyond that (experience), and how do we measure those. For example, people who have a good college experience are likely to be engaged in their jobs and have civic participation, be healthier and so on," shares Teresa Lubbers, Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education.

Once complete, the Gallup-Indiana effort will be incorporated into what CHE is calling the Indiana College Value Index. Lubbers says the group was already measuring the importance of college in a quantitative way and now will add the survey's qualitative method to the mix for "a more comprehensive look at college value."

Specifically speaking

The inaugural Gallup-Indiana piece of that puzzle has 15 public and private schools participating (see sidebar), including Purdue. Lubbers says that number is "very good for a first-time effort" and anticipates it will increase in the coming years after "individual campuses see the value of this in terms of driving policies and programs internally."

With partial subsidies provided by CHE and USA Funds, Lubbers stresses the fee for the survey is quite minimal. "The current price tag essentially is not much more than it would cost for one student's tuition for the year. There is nothing really cost prohibitive about this. Going forward, that's going to be the case whether we have the subsidy or not," she notes. "But what we have to do is to prove to schools and to students and families that they are going to use this value."

The online surveys – made available to alumni late 2015 and early 2016 – featured approximately 50 questions. National and Indiana-specific inquiries were included. The institutions also had the option to customize their survey with additional questions.

The pool of participants is "all living alumni that the schools have contact information for. The plan going forward in subsequent years is to do regular annual tracking of young alumni – that's where

Graduates at Manchester University and 14 other Indiana higher education institutions recently received in-depth surveys from their alma matters – asking about their experiences at school and how that has impacted their post-college life.





“(The Index) allows students and families to get a more comprehensive look. And it allows colleges and universities to actually improve, expand their services to address what they are (or aren’t) doing to provide satisfaction to their alums.”

– Teresa Lubbers
Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education

institutions will be able to start to look at change in progress over time; it’s important to know how they’re doing,” offers Brandon Busteded, executive director, education and workplace development, for Gallup.

“It becomes much more relevant when you’re talking about how graduates who just graduated last year are doing. Are they doing better than the graduates a year out?”

He says it’s “quite remarkable” on some level that, for many, this marks the first time alumni has been reached out to in this manner.

“A lot of schools know if you’ve given money, but this is really a relatively new experience for alumni to get a survey from their alma mater, asking them how they’re doing on all these different dimensions.”

The process is appreciated by the former students, Busteded relays. “We’ve seen schools getting a lot of thank you emails from alumni, saying this was really neat, thanks for reaching out, thanks for caring. It has other value to it beyond what we’re learning from the data.”

He also praises the move by CHE and “the way it was introduced to higher education as opposed to some flat-out mandate, which would not have been very well received.”

Expectations and takeaways

Both Manchester University and WGU Indiana jumped at the chance to take part in the project, citing the leadership of Lubbers and CHE, as well as Gallup’s reputation.

“We are really excited about the opportunity to be able to work with Gallup and gain a broader view of graduate outcomes so that we can really take a look at overall well-being, both for life and work for our graduates,” enthuses Elizabeth Bushnell, Manchester’s assistant vice president for institutional quality and success.

“We’re looking for opportunities to enhance the Manchester experience and the more feedback we get from our graduates about what

they experienced and what was really meaningful for them, the better we can enhance the experience for current (and future) students.”

Allison Barber, chancellor for WGU Indiana, believes the research “will identify or reaffirm that for us, that the investment people are making at the school is a good investment.”

The excitement of hearing from graduates is especially nice for WGU, she mentions.

“We don’t really have an alumni department. We’re all online. We occasionally run into alums and hear their stories, but this will be a first really focused outreach to our alumni.”

If Purdue is any indicator, the feedback gathered will indeed help strengthen current practices and highlight what was most appreciated.

“We learned that undergraduate research, getting undergraduate students actively involved in research projects, is one of the most powerful learning experiences they can have,” Daniels states.

“We learned – Purdue has always done this – that internships and cooperative work experiences are really, really valuable and valued by businesses. We know that’s got to be a bigger piece of tomorrow’s Purdue education.”

Busteded is impressed by both trailblazer Purdue and Indiana on the whole.

“There were some great highlights (in the research) about Purdue and there were some things that they’re doing lower than the national average – that they weren’t happy with. The cool thing was they just put it out there; the good stuff they highlighted and the bad stuff they said this is the stuff we’re working on and here’s what we’re doing.

“I appreciate that spirit because we haven’t seen a lot of that, and I think that’s encouraging ...

“It will be exciting to see it evolve and it’s great that it’s really been a very Indiana initiative that’s also getting quite a bit of national spotlight.”

External reverberation

When the collective results are published, Bushnell believes it will have the desired effect of being a marketing tool for higher education.

“There’s the state initiative to increase the percentage of the population with a high-quality credential or degree, and being able to demonstrate to the population the impact of education – I think that is really valuable.

“The state’s done a great job to identify the impact financially in terms of potential income from obtaining a credential or degree, but I think this is a broader view of some of those kinds of overall impacts of education. I think that also will be really important.”

Barber encourages the business community to take note of the upcoming report.

“I hear the stories all the time about employers who need to upskill their workforce. But it’s important to do it in the right areas and so I think the Gallup report will begin to shine a light on the programs across our state that are working well.

“I’m hoping that employers will read it, learn from it and endorse and support the programs that are worth the investment for citizens and for their employees,” she adds. “I think it’s going to be a good tool, not just for the universities and for our leadership in the state, but for business leaders as well.”

Campus Participants

- Ball State University
- Butler University
- Calumet College of St. Joseph
- Grace College
- Indiana University East
- Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne
- Indiana University Kokomo
- Ivy Tech Community College
- Manchester University
- Marian University
- Purdue Northwest (following unification of Purdue Calumet and Purdue North Central)
- Purdue University West Lafayette
- Taylor University
- Vincennes University
- WGU Indiana

RESOURCES: Allison Barber, WGU Indiana, at indiana.wgu.edu | Elizabeth Bushnell, Manchester University, at www.manchester.edu | Brandon Busteded, Gallup, at www.gallup.com | Mitch Daniels, Purdue University, at www.purdue.edu | Teresa Lubbers, Indiana Commission for Higher Education, at www.in.gov/che