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HIGH SCHOOL FOLLOW-UP SURVEYS: WHAT WORKS?

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Abstract

Increasing demands for accountability have prompted a renewed interest in determining effective methods of obtaining data from high school graduates and former students. The purpose of this investigation was to examine the methods and objectives of high school graduate/former student follow-up activities to identify procedures that resulted in high response rates and helpful information.

Information was obtained from three sources: local school systems in the Richmond metropolitan area, selected school systems in other areas of Virginia, and school systems in other states as identified through a search of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database.

The purposes of the follow-up activities continue to center on determining post-secondary efforts and employment status; however, studies developed to obtain baseline data and to measure strategic plan objectives were also found.

Although traditional mail surveys remain prevalent, innovative approaches involving focus groups and telephone response surveys were identified. Mail surveys that included a telephone interview component achieved highest response rates. Time of year, home school personalization of the survey request, amount of elapsed time between graduation, and administration of the survey, were other factors that appeared to contribute to response rates.

Recommendations are developed based on the need for planning, the determination of purpose, and the consideration of alternative methodologies.

Preface

This study serves as a general examination of high school graduate/former student follow-up activities being conducted by individual school systems in the Richmond, Virginia metropolitan area, by selected school systems in others of Virginia, and by those in other states.

Following the introduction to this study and a description of the purpose and specific questions being investigated, the methodology is presented. A discussion of the findings and an overview of conclusions derived from the findings comprised the fourth section.

The study concludes with an enumeration of recommendations. These suggestions focus on concepts related to planning, objectives, and methodology.

Introduction

For a number of years various educational agencies have attempted to obtain data from high school graduates and former students. Individual high schools, entire school systems, two- and four-year institutions of higher learning, and state departments of education exemplify the entities that have invested time, labor, and financial resources in conducting follow-up studies of specific subpopulations as well as entire populations of graduates and/or former students.

Published studies exhibit a variety of populations, including valedictorians (Arnold, 1993), students who did not pursue post-secondary education within two years of graduation (Wagenaar, 1986), and the entire population of a school system for five years from grade 9 to one year after graduation (Brown, 1993). More prevalent are studies devoted to special needs students and students enrolled in vocational-technical programs.

Follow-up studies traditionally share two common characteristics—method of administration and purpose. Many studies are conducted as mail surveys, and in some instances telephone interviews are used following the mailing to locate students, encourage student response, or to obtain data by proxy from family members or others if the students cannot be reached.

The purpose of follow-up research is often to determine the post-secondary endeavors and the employment status of those surveyed. Frequently these studies also contain sections devoted to respondents' perceptions of courses, services, programs of study, and the learning environment. Recent literature contains examples of other purposes; however, the method of administering these surveys is also in the form of a mail survey.

Mail survey response rates vary, apparently influenced by factors such as the length of elapsed time between graduation and the administration of the survey, and the time of year the surveys are mailed. The capricious nature of response rates affects the determination of purpose and the value of the findings. Other factors appear to influence return rates; however, little documentation exists of proven successful strategies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the activities performed by local school systems who examined their entire high school graduate or former student population or a sample thereof, and, with additional information from other school divisions, identify effective follow-up survey practices.

Three questions guided the research:

1. What characteristics are common to graduate/former student follow-up activities that achieve a response rate of 70% or above?
2. For what purpose do local school systems conduct follow-up studies of their entire population (or a random sample thereof), and how are the results used?
3. What methods of follow-up have systems used other than mail surveys and how is the success or value of these methods evaluated?

Methodology

Queries from local school systems who belong to the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium prompted this study. The initial effort sought to ascertain the follow-up activities being performed by consortium members. Representatives of the seven-member consortium were interviewed over the phone. In addition, two of the three school systems

conducting research of their graduates submitted material related to their efforts for use in developing this report.

The next phase focused on identifying representative school systems within the Commonwealth of Virginia to determine the scope and variety of activities being performed. A snowball sampling procedure was used. Inquiries were made first of personnel at the Virginia Department of Education. Researchers at a state university who collected data in connection with "High Schools That Work" and other initiatives were also contacted. Based on recommendations from these sources, personnel at six school systems, representative of various geographical areas of the state and of rural, urban, and suburban school systems, were contacted.

The final component involved an examination of efforts performed in other states. To locate published studies conducted outside Virginia, a search of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database was performed. The search was limited initially by year (1980-1997) and by language (English). Three hundred and thirty-one records were located. The entities conducting the research included community colleges, four-year institutions of higher education, state departments of education, research firms, and federal agencies.

These records were further restricted to studies produced in the last ten years (between 1987-1997). An examination of the 133 listings revealed a prevalence of studies of specific subpopulations of high school graduates. Nearly fifty percent of the studies were devoted either to students identified as special needs/learning disabled or to students who had been enrolled in vocational-technical education programs. Additional studies targeted groups

such as GED students, graduates of specialized or alternative schools, and teen mothers.

Further, approximately twenty percent of the studies had been conducted by two- and four-year institutions of higher learning. These studies varied widely. College freshmen who did not return to school, college graduates admitted to medical school, and vocational program graduates of a community college exemplify the populations researched in these studies.

In addition to the subpopulation specific research and the studies conducted by post-secondary institutions, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Minnesota, Texas, and other state departments of education performed follow-up activities. Thus, despite the more than 130 resources produced between 1987-1997, the number of studies conducted by local school systems and incorporating a representation of the total graduating class numbered less than 20.

Findings and Discussion

This section is comprised of four components. First, the results of an examination of the follow-up projects currently being conducted by members of the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium are presented. The second section contains the results of telephone interviews with representatives of school systems in other areas of Virginia. The third section contains a discussion of the findings of reports produced by local school systems in other states. A synthesis of the findings is presented in the final section.

Follow-up Studies Being Performed by Local School Systems

The first step in this examination was to determine the status of follow-up activities within the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium, composed of seven public school systems. Of the seven systems, three conduct follow-up studies of their high school graduates. Each system differs from the other in size, setting, and population. A description of the research performed by each system follows.

1. One system contains a single high school that graduates approximately 200 students each year. The Director of Guidance in this small city public school has conducted an annual follow-up survey of all graduates since 1981. The survey contains questions related to employment status, occupation, post-secondary endeavors, perception of the preparation received in high school, and the evaluation of 12 high school courses. Graduates are also afforded the opportunity to write in additional suggestions or comments.

The survey is mailed in May to the June and August graduates of the previous year. A cover letter from the Director of Guidance accompanies the survey. Recipients are asked to respond by June 1. During the summer, the Director of Guidance hand tabulates the responses received and develops a list of non-respondents. The director and three counselors begin in late fall to telephone non-respondents. Telephone interviews are conducted, and data regarding employment and education are recorded by proxy from family members. This method has resulted in a response rate of approximately 90%.

The purposes of the survey include the following:

- To determine the number of graduates pursuing post-secondary education
- To supplement data used in studies of graduation requirements
- To supplement studies of curricula evaluation.

The results are used to provide data to the state, for decisions about the number of credits that should be required for graduation, and have been shared with central office staff and with teachers (S. Jones, personal communication, December 11, 1997).

2. The second school system contains three high schools in an area experiencing a population migration and a corresponding move from a rural to suburban community. This system has recently completed the pilot testing and implementation of an alternative follow-up method.

After a pilot test in 1995, a full study was conducted the next year. The guidance counselors at each of the system's three high schools contacted students who had graduated at least two years previously and invited them to return to their respective high schools to participate in focus groups to discuss "Life After High School." Counselors contacted students who were employed full-time, students enrolled in post-secondary institutions, students with disabilities, students identified as gifted, and students from various programs of study.

The focus groups were facilitated by representatives of the Virginia Labor Studies Center. A list of questions was developed for use by the facilitators. No school personnel were present during the sessions, and student names were kept confidential.

The focus groups were audio-taped, and these tapes were transcribed and analyzed by school system personnel.

Recommendations resulting from the focus groups include the following:

- Conduct the groups every two years.
- Strive for a participant group size of 12-15.
- Strive for continued representation of graduates enrolled in post-secondary study as well as those employed full time.
- Assess ways to address needs identified by the participants (C. Urbansok-Eads, personal communication, December 15, 1997).

3. The third school system currently conducting follow-up studies is a large, urban system that chose to hire a consulting firm to survey the system's 1995 graduates. A survey was mailed to graduates approximately 15 months after graduation. In high schools in which the total number of graduates was less than 150, all students were mailed a survey. In schools in which the number of graduates exceeded 150, a random sample of approximately 150 graduates was selected to receive the survey. To ensure a response rate of 40-50%, retired school counselors were hired to telephone non-respondents and interview graduates over the phone.

The consulting firm collected, tabulated, and analyzed the data. The analysis included individual school reports as well as cross tabulations. The survey contains questions related to demographics, the value of certain high school courses, areas in which the graduate perceived a need for further instruction, and ratings of the learning environment, the teachers, and the counselors. The results of the survey have been

presented to the school board and also shared with high school principals (A. Allen, personal communication, December 11, 1997).

Follow-up Studies Being Performed by Other School Systems in Virginia

Six school systems in differing geographical areas of the state were contacted. Five systems are not currently conducting follow-up activities; one of the five indicated plans are underway to implement a pilot test; another indicated that follow-up studies had been conducted in the 1980s, but the system was no longer conducting the research.

Follow-up studies performed by one system during the 1980s were designed as telephone surveys, conducted every two years (1982, 1984, 1986). The telephone survey was implemented due to poor response to mail surveys. Data analysis of student records revealed that 98% of the graduates listed telephone numbers, and from these students a random sample was selected (Harris, 1987).

Surveys were conducted during the Christmas holidays because the researchers felt that it was more likely that graduates would be home for the holidays. Secretarial staff and Cooperative Education students performed the interviews for the 1984 and 1986 surveys. Interviewers received training in the survey process, in maintaining phone logs, and in coding responses for entry into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software. Student workers were not allowed to interview graduates from their own high schools (Harris, 1987).

The survey was designed to meet several objectives. Longitudinal data were needed as one measure of program quality. The extent to which graduates

felt they were prepared for their subsequent endeavors was considered an integral component of the success of the system. The survey also was viewed as one method of soliciting public participation in the effort to meet educational goals (Harris, 1987).

Several aspects of this system's survey differentiate it from others. The author notes that in earlier surveys, graduates were asked to respond using the choices of "excellent," "average," and "poor." In 1984 the choices were revised to reflect grades, and graduates were asked to assign a grade of "A," "B," "C," "D," or "F." This procedure allowed not only a wider range of responses, but also provided measures more closely associated with the graduates' educational experiences. In addition, the author indicates that in attempting to keep track of their former students, they planned to investigate class reunion committees. Although other systems may involve class reunion committees in this type of effort, this concept was not addressed in any of the published accounts reviewed (Harris, 1987).

Of the six school systems contacted, one large urban system is currently involved in pilot testing a follow-up procedure. The pilot is being conducted with the graduates of one high school. One half of the graduates were mailed a traditional paper and pencil survey accompanied by a cover letter from the high school principal. The survey was mailed in late November of 1997, and recipients were asked to return the survey by December 19th. The other half of the graduates were mailed a survey, also accompanied by a cover letter from the principal and asked to phone in their responses. The cover letter includes a phone number to call, and instructions for use of the telephone keypad to answer each question (S. Vaughn, personal communication, December 19, 1997).

The system installed a separate telephone line to accommodate the calls; the line is connected to a personal computer. Software was purchased to record and tally responses. The results of this pilot are unknown at this writing; however, the project design affords the opportunity to evaluate the potential of a less labor intensive method that may engender more responses.

Follow-up Studies Being Performed in Other States

An examination of the follow-up studies performed in various school systems throughout the country revealed that the only non-mail survey method was the aforementioned telephone survey performed in Virginia during the 1980s. Also, the focus group interview technique, conducted by one of the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium members, was not found in other studies. All of the studies examined were conducted as mail surveys, and several of these did incorporate a telephone interview component used to obtain data from non-respondents. Two facets of these studies serve as the focus of the following discussion: response rates and purposes of the research.

Response Rates

Response rates varied widely. Lower rates were typically associated with mail surveys that had no telephone component. For example, a mail survey of 2,404 graduates of an Arizona school system disseminated 15 months after graduation achieved a response rate of 14% (Cox, 1987). Ten days after mailing the survey, a postcard was sent reminding the graduates to return the survey. Three hundred and forty students responded, with females over-represented, and all minority groups under-represented in the returns. The survey was mailed October 1st. The author includes in a list of

13 recommendations the suggestion that "Future surveys of high school graduates should explore methods of securing a representative response...A random selection of the sample, stratified for six ethnic groups, would produce more reliable information for decision-making" (p. 58).

Several characteristics of this study may have contributed to the low number of returns. The survey instrument was lengthy, designed to gather extensive information. The number of questions, 103 for full-time students and 108 for other students, may have appeared overwhelming. The survey was mailed in October; thus, students enrolled in post-secondary study were less likely to be at home. The report does not indicate what, if any, material accompanied the mailing; it is not known if a return postage-paid envelope was provided, if a cover letter was included, or if any explanation of the purpose of the survey was presented to the graduates. The survey was mailed by bulk mail which would mean the surveys would not have been forwarded. No information on the number of undeliverable surveys is provided (Cox, 1987).

The author of the study cites the response rate for a previous study done by this school system as 23% (Cox, 1987), a rate found in two other studies, both of which were distributed through the mail. One report, from a school system in Texas indicates only that a return postage-paid envelope was enclosed with the survey and does not describe any effort to contact those not responding (Marable, 1995). In the second study, conducted by Detroit Public Schools, graduates who had not responded within a month were sent a second mailing (Stavros, 1991).

The study from Austin, Texas, contains a compilation of surveys performed annually beginning with the class of 1990 and continuing through the class

of 1993. Response rates range from a high of 33% from the 1990 class to a low of 21% from the class of 1992. The surveys were mailed between 12-18 months after graduation; however, the report does not include the mailing date by class. Thus it is unknown how the rate relates to time of administration. Also, the survey instrument is not appended, although the description provided in the report conveys an impression that the survey was not lengthy. A stratified (by GPA) random sample was used (Marable, 1995).

The Detroit study specifically addresses the date of the mailing. The author states that in a effort to enhance response rates the date of the mailing was moved from June to mid-November with a second mailing to non-respondents made December 20th. This change resulted in a response-rate increase of one percentage point (Stavros, 1991).

The Detroit survey was sent to the total population of 1989 graduates—7,395 students. Like the Arizona study, respondents were not representative of the total population. Females were over-represented, and respondents who had passed all three subtests of the High School Proficiency Examination were over-represented. Similar results were found in a survey conducted the previous year with 1988 graduates (Stavros, 1991). (This study is also listed in ERIC; see No. ED 331 935).

The highest response rate—75.4% was found in a study conducted in Saginaw, Michigan (Claus & Quimper, 1995). Characteristics of this follow-up activity differ in several ways from the three studies described above. First, the school system was smaller, containing two high schools with the total number of 1994 graduates equaling 491. The entire population received the survey. Second, less time had elapsed between graduation and

the administration of the survey. The survey was mailed in early March, nine months after graduation. Also, the survey instrument contained a total of 16 questions, four of which were devoted specifically to graduates involved in further educational study.

Another difference was the telephone interview component. Approximately two weeks after the survey was mailed, graduates who had not responded were called by either their high school counselor, or, if they had attended the Career Opportunities Center, by personnel from this Center, and the survey was conducted over the phone. Responses received by April 6 were included in the analysis. Gender and ethnic characteristics of the respondents were representative of the total population (Claus & Quimper, 1995).

No other study achieving a rate of over 70% (and meeting the specified criteria) was found. The Chicago Public School System attained a response rate of 57.4% in a study of their 1989 graduates (Storey & Qualls, 1991). Like the Saginaw survey, the Chicago study was administered approximately nine months after graduation. Also, as was done in Michigan, telephone interviews were used to gather information from graduates who had not returned the survey. Storey and Qualls state that responses from family members were recorded for educational and employment status only. A random sample of 1,237 graduates received the survey, and of that number, 479 graduates (38.7%) could not be located. A total of 710 responses were received, 185 of which were phone interviews with graduates' families.

Studies with response rates ranging from 30% to 50% all were conducted by mail. One system used volunteers and students to phone non-respondents and encourage them to complete the survey; however,

graduates were not interviewed over the phone (Salt Lake City School District, 1992). A study conducted in Pennsylvania, with a response rate of 45% warrants attention in that the amount of elapsed time for certain graduates was greater than that found in many reports. Runkle, Gray, and Speece (1991) examined the 1983, 1986, and 1990 graduates of all high schools in school systems served by an area vocational-technical center. (Two similar studies, not included in this review, were conducted by vocational-technical centers in the same state. See ERIC No. ED 329 748 and No. ED 337 644). The survey was mailed to 7,890 graduates (the total population) during the Thanksgiving holiday. A second mailing was sent to non-respondents during the Christmas holidays. A total of 3,579 responses were received, and 3,872 surveys were returned as undeliverable due to the expiration of a forwarding address. Respondents were found to be representative of the total population by "school district, gender, year of graduation, curriculum, and handicapped status" (p.10). Students identified as enrolled in the general program were the least likely to respond.

The authors state that of the graduates who were located, 90% responded to the survey. They attribute this response to the following characteristics of the mailing:

- A packet of coffee was enclosed with the survey
- A postage-paid self-addressed envelope was enclosed with the survey.
- Colored paper was used.
- A cover letter that was signed by the counselor at the home school was enclosed with the survey.
- A post office box to which the survey was addressed was used rather than the name of the vocational-technical center or any one school system.
- The survey was given the title of "Graduate Research Survey."

- The survey was mailed during holidays when graduates were likely to be home (Runkle, Gray & Speece, 1991).

The three systems with the lowest response rates all conducted their studies between 12-18 months following graduation. All three relied solely on the use of the mail; no telephone follow-up was employed. Two systems used a second mailing; in one case a postcard reminder, in the other, a second survey. Two of these studies do not contain enumeration of the contents of the mailing; thus, it is unknown if a home school representative (e.g., principal or counselor) signed a cover letter to the graduates.

Systems that achieved higher returns despite the passage of time, such as the Runkle, Gray, and Speece study did include a cover letter from a representative of the graduate's high school. A survey performed by the Salt Lake City School System (1992) of their 1986-87, 1989-90, and 1990-91 former students garnered a rate of 32%. Of the 3,990 surveys mailed, 1,010 (25.3%) were returned due to the lack of a forwarding address. The Salt Lake City survey was accompanied by a letter from the principal of the student's high school. The principal also signed a reminder postcard mailed to non-respondents and a revised letter attached to a second mailing of the survey.

In another study, a high school in North Carolina received responses from 50% of their graduates. The graduate's counselor's name was printed on the return label. This follow-up activity targeted 300 graduates (the entire graduating class), eleven months after graduation (Wilkinson, 1991).

A common characteristic of surveys that receive over a fifty percent response rate is the use of telephone interviews of those who do not return

the survey. Other characteristics that appear to have some bearing on returns include the following:

- Surveys are administered within nine months after graduation.
- A cover letter from a counselor, principal, or other representative of the student's high school accompanies the survey.
- The survey does not require a great amount of time to complete.

Purposes of Follow-up Studies

All of the survey instruments contained certain questions in common, such as employment status, involvement in post-secondary study, and demographic questions. The majority of the studies focused on concepts often associated with follow-up activities. Graduates were asked to evaluate their high school experience; identify courses that had proved most helpful and conversely those perceived as not helpful; rate the effectiveness of school services; and in some cases, to recommend improvements.

Some instruments, however, were developed to gather data related to specific purposes. For example, Claus and Quimper (1995) explain the Saginaw system's need to gather baseline data related to objectives in the strategic plan. The plan contained a set of ten "graduate standards" for which indicators of success were needed. The ten categories included "(1) academic achiever, (2) self-directed learner, (3) complex thinker, (4) effective communicator, (5) individual/group problem solver, (6) strong interpersonal relater, (7) collaborative worker, (8) creative quality producer, (9) community contributor, and (10) health conscious individual" (1995, p. 2). Thus, in addition to gathering data related to employment and educational efforts, the graduates were asked to rate how well their high schools had assisted them in areas such as learning how "to be a good manager of money, property, and resources" and "to examine and use information" (p. 15). Claus and

Quimper state that the average rating for each graduate standard was a "B." They also describe future plans to survey employers and post-secondary institutions to determine how these parties evaluate the graduates as based on the definitions of the graduate standards.

In another study, conducted by the Northfield (Minnesota) Public School System, a survey was designed to measure graduates' perceptions "of their levels of experience, skill, confidence, and frequency of occurrence" in each of eleven domains that included "decision making, handling conflicts with other people, information gathering and management, intercultural awareness, looking for and keeping a job, mathematical reasoning, oral communication, personal awareness, reading, technical literacy, and writing" (Jenni, Galotti & Johnson, 1997, p. vii). The Lyceum conducting this study developed a comprehensive plan for the research. Their discussion contained an identification of obstacles, including "...deciding what outcome measures ought to be used, and what defines success" (p. 3). The Lyceum's procedure for designing the study included public forums in which local business representatives and educators were invited to participate. A study group, using literature reviews, results of public forums, and meetings with educators identified the domains to be researched. Pilot testing was conducted both at a local secondary alternative center and with graduate students at a local state university.

The survey instrument was eight pages long and was prefaced with an instruction sheet. Questions related to the eleven domains covered over five pages; a page and a half solicited open-ended comments, and one page was devoted to demographic data. The survey was mailed to the entire graduating class of 1993 and of 1995 (a total of 485 students). Responses were received from 146 graduates yielding a response rate of 30%. The

number of surveys that were undeliverable is not provided nor are the numbers of respondents per graduating class. The authors conclude with a list of ten recommendations based on the results of the study. They also add five suggestions for areas of further research (Jenni, Galotti & Johnson, 1997).

The Chicago Public Schools also identified a specific purpose for their survey of their 1989 graduates (Storey & Qualls, 1991). Although the survey design was traditional in the attempt to gather data about employment status and educational endeavors, the results were intended for use as baseline data for studies of educational reform measures. The authors make a recommendation which appears as concern in other studies. They state, "The Board of Education should update student information files just prior to graduation to make future contact with graduates more feasible" (p. v).

Conclusions

Determining how and why some surveys achieve better results than others depends on standardized points of comparison, which are elements not always presented in discussion of follow-up activities. Practices characteristic of surveys with higher response rates include the following:

1. Surveys administered within one year of graduation achieved consistently higher return rates. The studies that contain data related to locating students reveal the effect of mobility; the percentages of students who could not be found ranged from 10% to 49%. Losses of this magnitude make it extremely difficult to obtain viable return rates.
2. Surveys that include a telephone interview component also achieved a higher number of responses. The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium member surveyed 90% of their graduates, and the oSaginaw system 75% incorporating a mail and phone methodology. It should be noted that in both cases data were obtained in some instances by proxy.

3. Surveys personalized in some way by the home school appeared to be a characteristic common to more successful surveys. These surveys contained cover letters from the high school principal, guidance counselors, or staff members. One representative of a Virginia school system stated in a telephone interview that in a study of vocational completers, the best return rates were achieved when the student's teacher contacted non-respondents and conducted telephone interviews (M. Grist, personal communication, January 5, 1998).
4. The need for accurate records, as illustrated in the Chicago Public Schools study, is mentioned in several reports. One representative of the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium explained that just prior to graduation, seniors are asked to complete an exit survey. This survey is used to obtain up-to-date addresses and phone numbers and solicits information about how the graduate can be reached in the future (S. Jones, personal communication, December 11, 1997).
5. The time of year that surveys are administered apparently has an effect although, at first glance, results do not bear out conventional wisdom. The lowest response rate was associated with an early October mailing (Cox, 1987). Stavors (1991) compared June return rates to November/December rates in his system and found the holiday mailing resulted in a one percent increase in returns. The highest rates were associated with surveys mailed in March and May; however, again, these surveys incorporated telephone interviews and were conducted within the first year after graduation.
6. Survey length, format, and presentation appear to be additional considerations; however the survey instrument was not included in every study and the purpose of the research influenced the design. Surveys that ranged between 2-3 pages are found in studies with higher returns.

The purpose and use of the results of the studies also varied although most systems indicated a desire to know their graduates' perceptions of the effectiveness of their high school instruction. They also wanted to know the employment status of their graduates and what post-secondary effort had been made. Systems conducting research to establish baseline data or to contribute to the measurement of particular objectives specified the relationship of the results to the purpose. Systems with more general goals

were less consistent in presenting how the results would be used and with whom the results would be shared. Purposes also influenced instrument design and considerations of using a commercially developed instrument. General observations of the purposes and of other characteristics follow.

1. Although some studies contained a list of recommendations, direct action taken as a result of the research is usually not specified. In some cases, this may be related to the fact that respondents are not representative of the total population. Cox (1987), Salt Lake City Public Schools (1992), and Stavros (1991) all noted that female respondents were over-represented. In the Cox and Salt Lake City research, minorities were found to be under-represented.
2. The majority of the research was conducted using locally developed survey instruments. Some studies contain information about pilot testing and the procedures used to develop the instrument; others do not. Salt Lake City Public Schools (1992) and one system in the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium were the only two systems reporting the use of a commercially developed instrument.
3. Few studies address the cost of the research. The Salt Lake City Public Schools (1992) study includes a page in the appendices itemizing costs. Wilkinson (1991) states that the cost of surveying 300 graduates of a single high school was under \$200.00.

Recommendations

An underlying theme recurrent in the previous section is planning.

Suggested planning considerations include

- Updating student records before graduation
- Ensuring data tapes or other forms of student data are not destroyed
- Pilot testing instruments for clarity, time to complete, and relationship of content to purpose

- Considering the amount of elapsed time. If longitudinal research is planned, investigate the possibility of a preliminary mailing during the first 6-9 months after graduation simply to update records.
- Determining when to conduct the study
- Investigating methods of administration.

Although the traditional mail survey may still be a viable method in small systems with less population movement, the results achieved in many studies reveal the need to explore other options. Further, data from the studies examined for this report illustrate a growing percentage of graduates who attend school and work. Marable's (1993) longitudinal study of 1990-1993 graduates found the percentage of full-time, non-working students declined from 60% in 1990 to 37% in 1993. Claus and Quimper (1995) state that many of the students enrolled in post-secondary study were also employed. The Salt Lake City Public Schools' (1992) survey revealed that 19% of the respondents were in school without a job. Thus, the time to complete a survey should be considered, and research utilizing more than one methodology may be needed. Possible alternatives include the following:

- As suggested in the Harris (1987) study, cooperative efforts with reunion committees either to locate students or to plan a joint project might prove beneficial.
- The focus group technique used by one of the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium members could be incorporated as a component of a study.
- The studies examined lacked any indication of asking students how they would prefer to be surveyed. If exit or other types of senior surveys are administered, provision could be made to solicit from the potential future respondents their recommendation. Do graduates return to their high

schools to attend social or athletic events? Would they be willing to return to school for a follow-up activity tied to a popular school function?

- Media use is not mentioned in the studies reviewed; however, would returns be enhanced if public service announcements were made? Could the Internet be used to announce the survey or conduct the research?
- Alternative modes of supplying the survey instrument (audio-cassette, diskette) might also be considered.

The focus of this study did not center on how the graduates of school systems throughout the country viewed the high school experience, but rather on characteristics of follow-up activities that achieved a level of success. However, the graduates contributed insightful comments and noted courses or programs that had proved helpful as well as areas where they felt additional instruction was needed. Accountability is an issue public schools must address, and follow-up activities could be useful components in demonstrating the worth of the education provided.

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