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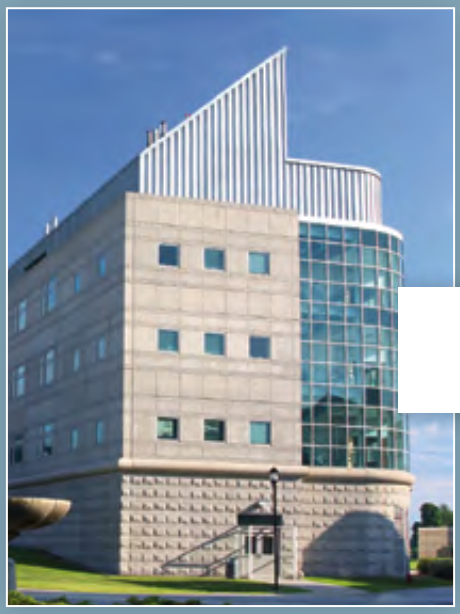

COLLEGE *and* UNIVERSITY

Educating the Modern Higher Education Administration Professional

Conspicuous Consumption in Higher Education
The Case of Academic Bling

Investigating the Impact of Cambridge International Assessments on U.S. Stakeholders
Student and Teacher Perceptions

An Examination of Program Selection Criteria for Part-Time MBA Students

forum

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Electronic Transcripts: Past, Present, and Future

CAMPUS VIEWPOINT

My Management Epiphanies (Don't Wait as Long for Yours!)

Making a Difference: Lessons Learned, Advice Given

Creating a Culture of Success for Staff: Five Lessons

COMMENTARY

Graduate Program Scheduling Gains Flexibility through Container Courses: A Case Study

VOL. 87 NO. 2 ◆ FALL 2011

Contents

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Conspicuous Consumpti

IN HIGHER EDUDU

The Case of Academic Bling

The history of academic regalia dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries; modifications were made until 1895, when the Intercollegiate Bureau on Academic Costumes established a standard code of academic dress. It is that code that for the most part is still in use today (Sullivan 1997). The traditional black gown along with cap and tassel—and hood, for advanced degrees—is standard attire for most commencement ceremonies. At some institutions, the apparel for the day ends there; at others, it is merely the basic outfit upon which students affix tokens of individual expression ranging from academic honors and social affiliation accessories to personal messages on their mortarboards. The extent to which this is permitted varies by institution.

Students are not the only ones with a vested interest in bringing attention to their graduation garb: Commencement accessory providers offer students such academic bling as rhinestone tassel tags and multicolored honor cords (Academic Regalia 2011). Some institutions allow only university-provided caps, gowns, and tassels. Honor cords may be regulated. For example, at Kennesaw State University, the specific honor society designations that may be worn at graduation are listed online (History 2011). In the Academic Costume Code, the Committee

By Brian A. Vander Schee

SPRING IS A TIME FOR GARDENING, BLOSSOMS, AND BASEBALL. AT AMERICAN COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITIES, IT IS ALSO A TIME FOR COMMENCEMENT CEREMONIES. STUDENTS ARE RECOGNIZED FOR THEIR SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENTS AS FACULTY AND STAFF CLOSE OUT ANOTHER ACADEMIC SCHOOL YEAR. FAMILY AND FRIENDS APPLAUD THE GRADUATES AND CELEBRATE THEIR SUCCESS. STUDENTS SHOW THEIR PRIDE IN HAVING ACCOMPLISHED SPECIAL STATUS BY WEARING VARIOUS COMMENCEMENT ACCESSORIES BESTOWED BY THEIR INSTITUTION AND OUTSIDE ORGANIZATIONS: STOLES, PINS, MEDALLIONS, AND HONOR CORDS ABOUND AS STUDENTS CROSS THE STAGE WITH VARYING DEGREES OF COLOR AND FLAIR. ALTHOUGH IT IS INTERESTING TO OBSERVE THE QUANTITY AND DIVERSITY OF 'ACADEMIC BLING,' ONE HAS TO WONDER HOW A STUDENT CAN EARN SO MUCH. HOW MUCH DOES IT COST? WITH SO MANY STUDENTS WEARING IT, IS IT REALLY THAT SPECIAL?

ion

CATION

on Academic Costumes and Ceremonies recommends that "nothing else should be worn on the academic gown" (Sullivan 1997).

Adding items to the commencement outfit may dilute feelings of institutional community and identity, which can be difficult to establish in the first place (Lowrie 2007). Perhaps the diversity inherent in a university setting is too great to encapsulate in one cohesive collegiate identity (Waeraas and Solbakk 2009). A brand identity can be manifested not only via such mechanisms as printed brochures and electronic media but also via community functions such as graduation. A weak visual identity may send the message that the institution does not really aspire to be either unique or well-established (Baker and Balmer 1997).

Consistent visual communications help support a successful institutional brand (Chapleo 2005). In fact, branding—and the marketing of which it is a part— extends beyond the economic benefits of recruiting and retaining students to students' emotional satisfaction at feeling "connected" to the institution (Arnett, German and Hunt 2003). The goal is to foster a lifetime affiliation with the institution and its functions.

A review of the literature reveals that some universities use tenets of 'relationship marketing' whereby students'

involvement with the institution helps to build its prestige even as it fosters a collegiate identity (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). This could be established through the graduation ceremony by wearing only Latin honors and not the commencement accessories provided by organizations outside of the institution. ('Latin honors' refers to the designations *cum laude*, *magna cum laude,* and/or *summa cum laude* based on achievement of a minimum cumulative GPA.) For example, in 2008, administrators at Assumption College decided to allow only Latin honor cords provided by the College to be worn at commencement. The rationale was to establish a standard cumulative GPA requirement for such honors rather than to allow honor societies' various academic criteria, (which may be lower than the institutional minimum for Latin honors). One honor society member responded, "Most of the motivation for the members of these societies is the honor cord they are able to wear at graduation, and without this motivation, these honor societies will be lost on campus and there may be no activity within them" (Kellet 2008). It would seem that such students esteem their personal identity more than that of the institutional community.

Students may view graduation as their day to be recognized for their individual achievements. In contrast, colleges and universities may view graduation as a day to foster a sense of community among people who will be connected for life via their collective experience of and affiliation with the institution. Institutions thus must be careful to not "lose" their identity to commercialization from the outside or commoditization from within (Gupta and Singh 2010). At graduation, the choice may be between honor society commencement accessories on the one hand and institutional honors whereby most graduates are recognized on the other.

METHOD

Registrars holding membership in the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) were invited to complete an online survey regarding commencement, honors, and institutional policies. Completed responses were received from 717 registrars or associate registrars representing 594 institutions. Although personal perspectives were solicited from all respondents, institutional data were provided by only one representative per institution so as to avoid duplication of information. Further information was gleaned from institutional data reported to the National Center for Education Statistics via IPEDS. Of the 594 responding institutions, 39 percent were public, 59 percent were private not for profit, and 2 percent were private for profit. Institutional size varied, with 20 percent enrolling fewer than 1,000, 47 percent enrolling between 1,000 and 4,999, 18 percent enrolling between 5,000 and 9,999, 9 percent enrolling between 10,000 and 19,999, and 7 percent enrolling 20,000 or more students. In terms of the highest degree awarded, 20 percent of responding institutions awarded the associate, 39 percent the bachelor's, 26 percent the master's, and 15 percent the doctoral degree. Of the bachelor's degree–granting institutions, approximately one-third self-identified as liberal arts, one-third as "diverse fields," and one-third as "special focus" according to the Carnegie Classification System.

RESULTS

Respondents were asked about undergraduate graduation events and student attendance. The average undergraduate commencement participation rate of responding institutions was 78 percent, with a standard deviation of 20 percent and a range of 6 percent to 100 percent. All seven institutions reporting less than a 30 percent participation rate were associate degree–granting colleges. Of the fourteen institutions that reported a 100 percent undergraduate commencement participation rate, four awarded the associate degree as its highest degree, nine the bachelor's degree, one the master's degree, and two the doctoral degree.

COMMENCEMENT POLICIES

Registrars were asked about Latin honor cords. The majority (57%) of responding institutions have their students wear Latin honor cords at commencement. Of those that do, the vast majority provide the cords for free or include the cost in a graduation fee charged to all graduating students. Only twelve institutions indicated that Latin honor cords are neither given to students for free nor included in the graduation fee. (The price ranged from $3 to $25.)

Of those who provided data regarding the minimum cumulative grade point average needed to earn a Latin honor, the majority (58%) use 3.50 as the cut-off. The next most common cut-off is 3.40 (12%). While some reported a cut-off as low as 3.00, the highest minimum grade point

average needed for a Latin honor was 3.89. There also was considerable variability in the percentage of the graduating undergraduate class that earned Latin honors. The range was from 5 percent to 70 percent, with the average being 30 percent. Overall, only 10 percent of institutions granted Latin honors to less than 10 percent of the graduating class. The same percentage of institutions granted Latin honors to at least half of the graduating class.

Registrars were asked if any specific policies were in place regarding cap accessories, such as mortarboards or tassels, as well as gown accessories, such as stoles or pins. Of the respondents who provided an answer, 36 percent reported that their institutions have specific policies regarding cap accessories. The most common policies are "must wear cap and tassel provided by the university"; "no visible decorations are to be worn"; and "no writing on mortarboards." A more detailed policy articulates that "the cap is to be worn so that the top is parallel to the ground." One states, "Only approved tassels and cords can be worn; however, our enforcement police are not present." Another warns, "Caps that are adorned will be swapped out by the faculty marshals for an empty cap."

Specific policies regarding gown accessories such as stoles or pins are in place at 27 percent of the responding institutions. Policies varied somewhat. "No accessories from social or non-academic organizations may be worn" was most common. Some were stringent: "No honorary or society stoles or cords"; others seemed more flexible: "Only officially recognized groups may give out cords. However, [this policy] is not enforced, and many other groups create their own stole." One respondent wrote, "Our policy is no cords, stoles, etc., yet the policy is violated with increasing frequency." (*See* Table 1.)

ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES

Registrars were asked their perspectives on what kinds and how many of each type of organizational membership students should be allowed to represent through the wearing of various commencement accessories (*i.e.*, pins, cords, stoles, or medallions) at graduation. Their general impressions were determined by rating their level of agreement with statements such as "Latin honors should not be allowed at commencement." Another sample survey item was "There should be a limit on the number of national (non-discipline-based) honor organizations students can represent via academic accessories at commencement." Membership in national honor societies is based on academic achievement; students pay for their organizational membership and purchase accessories separately.

The survey also asked for the level of agreement with statements such as "Students should only be allowed to wear one discipline-based academic accessory per organization at commencement." This was another way of soliciting registrars' opinions as to whether students should be allowed to wear only an honor cord to represent a particular organization (as opposed to an honor cord, pin, stole, and medallion, all for the same organization). For the purpose of this study, commencement accessories from social organizations were based only on student-paid organizational membership, not academic achievement. (*See* Table 2, on page 6.)

Registrars generally agreed that accessories reflecting Latin honors should be allowed at commencement even though only a little more than half of the institutions in this study (56 percent, $n = 315$) actually permit such. There was neutral to general agreement that national and discipline-based honor organizations should be represented via commencement accessories. Opinions regarding social organizations were more negative. Results as to whether students should represent only one organization at commencement were mixed even though the level of agreement as to restricting such representation for social organizations was somewhat higher. Respondents tended to agree that regardless of the kind of organization, only

Table 1.

Commencement Attire Policy (n=298)

Commencement Policy	Percentage of Institutions
Specific Cap Accessory Policy Only	10
Specific Gown Accessory Policy Only	1
Specific Cap and Gown Accessory Policy	26
Total: Specific Cap and/or Accessory Policy	37
Total: No Specific Cap and/or Gown Accessory Policy	63

one commencement accessory should be worn. Overall, a bias against social organizations being represented at graduation through the wearing of commencement accessories was evident.

Table 2.

Registrars' Perspectives on Membership Representation via Commencement Accessories (n=281)*

Survey Item	Latin Honor Accessories	National Honor Accessories	Discipline Honor Accessories	Social Org. Accessories
Commencement accessories should not be allowed.	1.95	2.62	2.48	3.30
There should be a limit on the total number of organizations a student can represent with accessories.	–	3.06	2.96	3.35
Students should be allowed to wear only one accessory per organization.	–	2.74	2.73	2.86
There should be no limit on the number of organizations or accessories per organization a student can represent or wear.	–	2.90	2.92	2.51

* Average level of agreement where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

Table 3.

Level of Agreement as to the Meaning of Commencement Accessories (n=281)*

Survey Item	Latin Honor Accessories	National Honor Accessories	Discipline Honor Accessories	Social Org. Accessories
Academic Achievement	4.06	3.64	3.76	–
Institutional/Discipline Affiliation	–	3.24	3.73	3.42
Personal Marketing	2.61	2.92	2.91	3.02
Economic Status	1.99	2.35	2.29	2.77

* Average level of agreement where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

Registrars then were surveyed regarding their level of agreement as to what commencement accessories represent. This was determined by rating their responses to statements such as "Latin honors reflect students' personal marketing" and "Discipline-based commencement accessories reflect student economic status." (*See* Table 3.) There was general agreement that Latin honor accessories—more than national or discipline-based honor accessories—reflect academic achievement. Discipline affiliation was ascribed primarily to discipline-based accessories. The greatest level of agreement pertained to social organization accessories as reflecting personal marketing. (That said, the average response was mostly neutral.)

NATIONAL HONOR SOCIETIES

Survey respondents were asked which non–discipline based national organizations are recognized by their institutions. Although 43 different national honor societies were mentioned (some were discipline specific), only six were cited by at least seven institutions. Table 4 (on page 7) shows the pricing structure for membership and academic accessories offered by the national honor societies more frequently cited by survey respondents.

DISCIPLINARY HONOR SOCIETIES

Disciplinary affiliation may be established nationwide. Society leaders are keenly aware that one of the motivations for students to join is that doing so gives them the opportunity to vaunt that they have earned the right to join. Psi Chi (International Honor Society in Psychology) President Alvin Wang (2010) wrote to invited members, "...I hope to convince you there are many more ways in which membership in Psi Chi can enhance your opportu-

nities and that you will consider Psi Chi as more than just a resume builder or as a means for accumulating academic bling at commencement."

Faculty also are aware of the allure of disciplinary independence. At some universities, departmental affiliation is solidified via diploma ceremonies separate from the university-wide commencement event. For example, graduates of the neuroscience program at The College of William & Mary (2011) receive a brain cell pin to wear at graduation. This 'bling' is a way to build solidarity among students and faculty in a particular program. Schools of Nursing also routinely hold their own pre-graduation pinning ceremonies for the same purpose. In fact, the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS) lists 68 official members with disciplinary representation ranging from geography (Gamma Theta Upsilon) to professional counseling (Chi Sigma Iota) to operations research and management science (Omega Rho) (ACHS Member Societies 2011). Many more discipline-based honor societies exist beyond those holding membership in ACHS. Examples include Alpha Mu Alpha (marketing), Gamma Sigma Epsilon (chemistry), Kappa Delta Pi (education), and Phi Alpha (social work), among others.

DISCUSSION

At one time, earning Latin honors was a real distinction among members of a graduating class. At some institutions, this is still the case. However, consider that the average undergraduate cumulative GPA rose, on average, 0.1 (on a 4.0 scale) per decade from 1940 to 1990; it continued to increase from 1991 until 2006—from 2.93 to 3.11. In 2010, the average cumulative GPA at public universities was 3.0; at private institutions, it was 3.3 (Rojstaczer and Healy 2010). Those findings are consistent with this study, where undergraduates' average cumulative GPA was 3.0 at public universities and 3.2 at private institutions. As the average cumulative GPA continues to increase, more and more students become eligible for Latin honors. On average, 30 percent of students graduating from colleges and universities included in the present study earn Latin honors. Are Latin honors truly a distinction? No wonder students join other honor societies!

Approximately one-third of institutions have cap and/or gown policies in place. It is possible that such policies exist primarily to promote respect for commencement rather than to discourage the display of academic bling. Those institutions that do not have commencement policies in place either may seek to foster a spirit of individual expression (or a "fun" atmosphere) or may lack the means to enforce such policies and thus have chosen not to implement them in the first place. An unintended effect may be the proliferation of non-institutional commencement accessories that bring attention to individual students. Such accessories may or may not represent rigorous academic standards, but they all cost money. (*See* Table 4.)

Table 4.

Representative National Honor Society Eligibility and Pricing for Membership and Accessories

Society	Eligibility	Fee	Cord	Stole	Medallion
Alpha Sigma Lambda	Top 20%, non-traditional, 3.2 GPA, 12 Arts & Sciences credits	$30.00[a]	$16.50	$18.50	–
Alpha Sigma Nu	Top 15% of class, loyalty, service, Jesuit institution	$60.00	$30.00[b]	–	$15.00
Golden Key	Top 15% of class	$80.00	$16.00	$24.00	$20.00
Kappa Gamma Pi	Top 10% of class, leadership, service	$30.00	$8.00	–	–
Phi Beta Kappa	Top 10% of class, Arts & Sciences grads	$75.00[a]	$9.50	$32.00	–
Phi Kappa Phi	Top 10% of class	$45.00	$10.00[c]	$24.00	$11.00

[a] Membership fee varies by institution.
[b] Price for lapel pin; honor cord not available to members.
[c] Watches ranging in cost from $240 to $290 and rings ranging in cost from $45 to $485 are also available.

Source: www.alphasigmalambda.org, www.alphasigmanu.org, www.goldenkey.org, www.kappagammapi.org, www.pbk.org, www.phikappaphi.org

For those who can afford national honor society accessories, "personal marketing"—or at least the noticeable display of purchasing ability—is greatly in evidence. An informal survey of graduating students at one institution found almost unanimous support for the idea that students purchase and wear honor society accessories for self-promotion and particularly for recognition by their parents.

Wearing Latin honor accessories likely is not viewed as an indicator of a student's economic status: almost all institutions in the present study provide Latin honor cords for free. Neither is their wearing viewed as a personal marketing tool: students do not apply for them; rather, they are bestowed on all who meet the minimum academic criteria.

In contrast, social organization accessories are believed to reflect students' economic status and are less likely to be allowed at graduation. (Initiation fees and annual dues can range from $375 for Sigma Chi to as much as $550 for Delta Kappa Epsilon.) Certainly, the criteria for social organization membership are unique in that academic standards are not routinely evident. Nevertheless, many social organizations charge annual membership dues in the same price range as honor societies such as Delta Sigma Phi ($50) and Kappa Alpha Psi ($75). Thus, differentiation by economic status is less pronounced than survey respondents suggested.

Consideration of a specific example may clarify the economic factor associated with honor society membership: A student who has a cumulative GPA in the top 10 percent of her class and who has earned all of her credits from the same institution (thus making her eligible for membership in Alpha Chi, Alpha Kappa Mu, and Golden Key); who is a double major in economics (making her eligible for membership in Omicron Delta Epsilon and Pi Gamma Mu) and business (making her eligible for membership in Beta Gamma Sigma, Delta Mu Delta, and Sigma Beta Delta); who shows strong leadership skills (making her eligible for membership in Mortar Board and the National Society of Collegiate Scholars); and who earned a high GPA in her first year (making her eligible for membership in Lambda Sigma, Alpha Lambda Delta, and Phi Eta Sigma) could conceivably gain membership in a dozen honor societies. This number increases to seventeen or eighteen if she happens to be of non-traditional age and is pursuing a liberal arts degree (making her eligible for membership in Alpha Sigma Lambda and Phi Beta Kappa) at an institution with a Jesuit (making her eligible for membership in Alpha Sigma Nu) or Catholic (making her eligible for membership in Delta Epsilon Sigma or Kappa Gamma Pi) foundation. Of course, she will need $739 to cover the membership fees and another $179 to purchase the requisite honor cords. An additional $226 would be required for matching stoles and $185 for medallions. Most societies provide a complimentary lapel pin and certificate with the membership fee. For those that do not, another $97 is required for pins. Chapter fees, which vary by institution, add to the total cost. Some of the challenge may lie in being in the top 10 percent of one's class; yet a number of honor societies welcome the top 20 percent or even 35 percent in a class, depending on the field of study.

This may seem like an exaggerated case. Nevertheless, the point is that for the resourceful student, it is no challenge to attain honor society memberships in order to garner academic bling. Certainly, these societies offer students benefits such as access to scholarships, professional development opportunities, corporate discounts, and networking possibilities. They are sensitive to collegiate decorum; some even recommend that students confirm institutional policies before purchasing graduation accessory items. A mitigating factor is that most societies must have a local chapter for students to join. Thus, institutions that welcome honor society chapters to campus foster the proliferation of academic bling. Conspicuous consumption (*i.e.*, the display of society membership) by graduating honor society members raises the bar in terms of what is required to truly stand out at commencement.

When a student is given a national academic award, both the individual and the institution are celebrated as both are named. In contrast, an academic distinction is weakened or even commoditized when it is bestowed on a greater percentage of the graduating class. So when, on average, the top 30 percent of graduates at a college will be recognized with Latin honor cords, the student in the example above feels compelled to flaunt her top 10 percent status by purchasing honor society cords. The downward spiral accelerates, with the result that students' desire to distinguish themselves—if only by the display of commencement accessories from outside organizations—further diminishes their institutional affiliation. Such mechanisms work against building a collegiate brand identity based on community and achievement. To the extent that students promote their own personal brand,

the institutional brand is diminished. Accessories at commencement change the message from "*We* are North University cum laude graduates" to "*I* am a Sigma Scholar."

IMPLICATIONS

What is the value of graduating with honors when the majority of students at some institutions do so? As grade inflation has increased students' average cumulative GPA, perhaps the minimum GPA required for Latin honors should also increase so as to protect the honors' distinctiveness. The adjustment should reflect the institutional increase in graduates' average cumulative GPA such that the same percentage of graduates who earned Latin honors when the academic standards for such first were put in place is awarded. Meanwhile, it is encouraging to find that the vast majority of institutions provide Latin honor cords for free; this seems a reasonable approach to recognizing students' academic achievement regardless of their economic status.

Institutional commencement policies—or the lack thereof—influence the proliferation of honors recognition, which is based in part on students' economic status. Against the backdrop of a greater percentage of students earning institutional Latin honors, the more accessories students are allowed to purchase and wear, the less distinctive each cord or pin becomes. Thus, a student must acquire and display even more adornments if he is to truly stand out. This is where economics come into consideration: Given the dollar amount associated with securing membership and then purchasing the requisite academic bling, those who have demonstrated academic achievement and who have adequate access to financial resources will stand out in the commencement crowd—at least until they are "out-blinged" by another graduate.

A necessary first step is to examine the proliferation of non–Latin honor accessories. Limiting the number of societies a student may represent at commencement will emphasize academic achievement while downplaying the

display of accumulated conspicuous adornments. This may be accomplished in a more direct way by limiting the number of honor society chapters on campus. However, because such action may not be well received by the campus community, policy permitting only one accessory per honor society may mitigate the marginal utility of paying one membership fee and then stocking up on various bling from the same organization. Some institutions already have such policy in place; some take it a step further by not allowing non–academic society representation at all. An equalizing approach is to allow honor society chapters on campus but to limit commencement accessories to Latin honor cords provided by the institution. Such a policy may seem too restrictive to some, but it does work in favor of building institutional identity, diminishing personal promotion, marginalizing economic status, and truly distinguishing outstanding academic achievement. At a minimum, it merits institutional consideration given the even more restrictive stance recommended by the Academic Costume Code.

A final note is that policies regarding commencement accessories that can or cannot be worn at graduation should be enforced. If they are not, they should be adjusted to reflect current practice. This will result in all students being treated equally and in *not* giving extra attention to graduates who violate the policy and less to those who are compliant. Perhaps discussions regarding conspicuous consumption as evidenced by academic bling will expand further as more faculty notice the diminishing number of students who cross the commencement stage absent any "personal flair."

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Investigating the Impact of Cambridge International Assessments on U.S. Stakeholders

STUDENT TEACHER

As part of the continuing program to study the impact of its international assessments, the University of Cambridge International Examinations ('Cambridge') has undertaken a series of studies investigating the impact on a range of US stakeholders. This paper reports on research designed to respond to a series of washback and impact questions seeking data on: the profiles of the candidates taking Cambridge assessments and teachers preparing students for the assessments; the washback of Cambridge assessments on courses preparing students; and the impact of Cambridge assessments on the students who have taken them.

Data were collected on an opportunity sample of five case study high schools and two universities. The main findings of the study are presented according to the type of data collected: questionnaires, interviews and discussions, and classroom observations.

By Stuart Shaw

PERCEPTIONS

Given the increase in the number of applications for admission to colleges and universities for the limited number of seats in freshmen classes, students and universities in the United States must consider all available indicators of success in higher education. School districts have been encouraged to offer college-level coursework to high school students. The approach to this is multi-faceted and includes Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), early college enrollment, and Cambridge International Advanced Levels.

The Advanced Placement program (sponsored by the College Board) is the most common acceleration mechanism and has been a staple in U.S. education for more than half a century. Initially established as a single program for internationally mobile students in the late 1960s, the International Baccalaureate (IB) has grown globally in popularity but nowhere more than in the United States, where it now is afforded university recognition similar to that provided to AP. Although the University of Cambridge International Examinations (Cambridge) has offered examinations since 1858, it is relatively new in offering its curriculum in the United States. Nevertheless, Cambridge is now experiencing the same recognition curve that IB experienced in the 1970s and 1980s.

As part of the continuing program to update and refine its study of the impact of the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), the International Advanced Subsidiary level (AS level), and the International Advanced level (A level), Cambridge has undertaken a series of studies investigating their impact on a range of U.S. stakeholders. Investigating impact is an important aspect of determining the usefulness of an assessment in terms of fulfilling its intended purpose; impact studies perform an important role in terms of assessment accountability.

Data have been collected from five case study high schools in Florida and Virginia and two universities in Florida and Minnesota. The focus of the study is on: the profile of the impact study participants; Cambridge "washback" on preparation content, methods, skills, activities, and materials; perceptions of Cambridge test

fairness, pressures, and assessment likes and dislikes; and a summary of impact study face-to-face data on test difficulty and validity. The main outcomes are presented and linked to future-related research including triangulation of findings from a parallel predictive validity study.

CONTEXT

Cambridge offers the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), a two-year qualification aimed at fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds. Cambridge IGCSE encourages learner-centered and inquiry-based approaches to learning. It has been designed to develop learners' skills in creative thinking, inquiry, and problem solving, providing a sound preparatory basis for the next stage of education. More than 70 subjects are available for study, and schools may offer any combination thereof. Some IGCSE subjects have two course levels: the Core Curriculum and the Extended Curriculum. The Extended Curriculum includes the material from the Core Curriculum as well as more advanced material.

Cambridge also offers the International Advanced Subsidiary (AS)/Advanced (A) level, a two-year international qualification aimed at the sixteen- to eighteen-year-oldage range and which is intended to follow the IGCSE. A-level courses are designed to be flexible and can be structured in a variety of ways:

- *Option 1*: Candidates can take all papers of the Cambridge International A-level course in the same examination session, usually at the end of the second year of study.
- *Option 2*: Candidates can opt for a 'staged' assessment route, taking the Cambridge International AS level in one examination session and completing the final Cambridge International A level at a subsequent session.
- *Option 3*: Candidates take only the Cambridge International AS level at the end of either a one- or two-year course. The Cambridge International AS level syllabus content is half a Cambridge International A-level program.

Cambridge awards a Cambridge AICE Diploma to students who have passed a prescribed number of subject examinations at A level and/or the AS level. To qualify for a Cambridge AICE Diploma, students must pass at least one examination from each of three subject groups: Mathematics and Sciences, Languages (both foreign and first), and Arts and Humanities. In the United States, Cambridge International AS- and A-level examinations are sometimes referred to as 'Cambridge AICE' or 'AICE' examinations. Students passing AS- and A-level examinations may be awarded entry-level or intermediary-level university course credit by examination or advanced standing at U.S. colleges and universities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPACT STUDIES

High-stakes assessments will always have some impact on teaching and learning as well as on other stakeholders outside the classroom. Therefore, every systematic effort should be made to ensure that assessments achieve a positive impact on educational processes and on the individuals affected by the results. It is important that impact studies take account of the perceptions of stakeholders because their attitudes toward the test may prove relevant to its validity. This includes the uses to which the tests and results are put by stakeholders. Even so, it is not possible to legislate for all of the social consequences of a test, nor to obtain the perspective of all potential stakeholders in any one study.

APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF TEST IMPACT

Within the broader educational measurement literature, the impact concept includes the wider influences of tests on the stakeholder community (Hamp-Lyons 1997; McNamara 2000; Saville 2009; Wall 1997 ; Weiss 1998)—in other words, the influences of educational assessments—their effects and consequences, beyond the immediate learning context (Hawkey 2006). Thus, impact research investigates issues of test use and social impact in *macro* contexts of society (Bachman and Palmer 1996; Saville 2009). Impact generally is considered to include 'washback,' the effect of testing on teaching and instruction (Davies *et al.* 1999), and is seen as "one form of impact" (Hamp-Lyons 1997). If impact relates to test use at the macro level, then the more traditional concept of washback relates to narrower *micro* contexts in the learning environment (*e.g.*, the classroom, school, micro-level participants).

The dynamic relationship between the impact and washback contexts reflects the growing need for awarding agencies to implement an extensive test-validation, evidence-based approach to educational planning and to

the development of high-stakes assessments—particularly where the tests have widespread currency and recognition (Shaw and Weir 2007). "Washback and the impact of tests more generally has become," therefore, "a major area of study within educational research" (Alderson 2004), and related studies can play a significant role in ensuring that ethical testing is achieved. For example, Shohamy (1999) notes that test instruments "are powerful because they lead to momentous decisions affecting individuals and programs" (1999). Hamp-Lyons (1997) argues that an awarding agency should evaluate its test instruments "from the perspective not only of the test-setter but also of the other stakeholders."

The impact concept used here is grounded in a 'consequentialist' conception of validity. Messick (1989, 1996) has argued that it is necessary in validation studies to ascertain whether the social consequences of test use and interpretation support the intended testing purpose(s) and are consistent with other social values. Score-based inferences are perceived as a function of the external social consequences of the testing. Messick (1989) stresses that "...the social values and the social consequences [of an examination] cannot be ignored in considerations of validity."

The consequentialist view enables awarding agencies not only to focus on whether an assessment is measuring what it is intended to measure but also to determine whether the outcomes of the assessment are being used in an appropriate way. While an awarding agency cannot be held responsible for all possible uses of the outcomes of the assessments it provides, it can take responsibility for being very clear regarding legitimate uses, can investigate patterns of use and impact, and can issue cogent and precise guidance to stakeholders on how to interpret test scores.

Impact studies that periodically monitor the context of learning and the context of test use should be undertaken in a cyclical, iterative manner such that they inform future test development and policy making (Shohamy 1999).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was designed to provide data on:

- the profiles of students taking the Cambridge assessments;
- the washback of Cambridge assessments on courses preparing students to take them;
- the profiles of students who have already taken Cambridge assessments;
- the impact of Cambridge assessments on students who have already taken the assessments;
- the profiles of the teachers who prepare students to take the Cambridge assessments;
- the washback of Cambridge assessments on the teachers who prepare students to take the assessments;
- the washback of Cambridge assessments on course textbooks and preparation materials; and
- lesson observations and what they indicate about the washback of Cambridge assessments on instruction.

METHODOLOGY

The complexity of the interrelationships among variables in an impact study necessitates a multifaceted and often qualitative approach. It is important to the success of the study, therefore, that a suite of standardized instruments and procedures is developed in order to understand impact better and to conduct effective surveys to monitor it (Hawkey 2004).

Questionnaires including open-ended items were used to measure teacher and student attitudes. However, given that these may lack ecological validity if the researcher selects the response options, a more insightful and informative way to reveal the complexity of participant experiences and perceptions is triangulation of interviews, observation, and questionnaire data. Observation not only can inform questionnaire design and contextualize otherwise incomprehensible responses but also can correct potentially misleading questionnaire or interview data.

A number of impact instruments were adapted for the study from existing, validated instruments:

- *student questionnaires* including questions relating to student background; learning, study, and exam-taking approaches; perceptions of Cambridge courses; affective and motivational aspects; and examination experience;
- *teacher questionnaires* including questions relating to teacher background and experience, perceptions of examinations and student performance, nature and content of courses, extent and use of materials, and curriculum;
- *school lesson observation analysis instrument* enabling data to be collected on lesson types, materials, facilities, student activities, and communicative opportunity analysis information; and

Table 1.

Impact Data Collection Matrix

High School	Type of Data Collection			
	Questionnaire (n completed)	Focused Discussion Group[1] (n held)	Interview (n held)	Lesson Observation (n held)
IGCSE High School Student Data				
A	53	1	7	2
B	54	1	0	1
C	163	1	6	2
D	155	1	6	2
E	284	1	0	2
AS-/A-Level High School Student Data				
A	145	1	7	1
B	127	1	0	3
C	151	1	9	2
D	117	1	10	2
E	187	1	0	3

[1] Group sizes varied between 4 and 11 discussants.

- *semi-structured interview/focused discussion group protocols* covering aspects relating to participant background, learning/study approaches and teaching practice, assessment issues, test validity and reliability, and university experience (where applicable).

Data were collected on students studying at five high schools; 709 were IGCSE students and 727 were AS-/A-level students. Nearly 60 (59) teachers from the same schools also participated in the study. The profiling of participants served as a baseline against which to evaluate future studies and provided additional evidence that the participants typified the Cambridge population as a whole. (*See* Table 1.)

The views of students enrolled at two universities were elicited: 11 students (5 male, 6 female) were U.S. citizens enrolled at a university in Florida, and 6 students (3 male, 3 female) from China, Pakistan, Singapore, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka were enrolled at a university in Minnesota. The students were at various stages in their college degree programs and were studying across a range of disciplines. The students' ages were between eighteen and 23 years.

FINDINGS

Data from the IGCSE students are summarized in Table 2, on page 17. The questionnaire separately targeted:

- students who had not taken an IGCSE (463 candidates, or 65 percent of the survey sample); and
- students who had already taken an IGCSE (246 candidates, or 35 percent of the survey sample).

Data from AS-/A-level students are profiled in Table 3, on page 18. Again, the questionnaire separately targeted:

- students who had not taken an AS/A level (162 candidates, 22%); and
- students who already had taken an AS/A level (565 candidates, 78%).

Data pertaining to teachers of preparation courses are also presented in Table 4, on page 19.

The teacher profile suggests that fairly experienced, qualified teachers (most of whom have chosen to teach Cambridge programs) tend to teach Cambridge preparation courses; they justify their choice by citing the Cambridge curriculum and aims together with the opportunity to work with good students. Most have received training to teach the Cambridge program and have additional experience teaching a similar level offered by other assessment agencies (predominantly AP and IB).

What follows is a summary of the perceptions that were evidenced by the impact study questionnaire as well as interview and observational data.

Student Perceptions According to Questionnaire Data

IGCSE

- Fair test of ability
- High proportion of students who performed to the best of their abilities

- Test students' knowledge (this does not refer to curriculum coverage but rather relates to student knowledge at the time of the exam)
- Inspires confidence in perceptions of teachers' knowledge and ability
- Teacher critical when choosing AS/A levels
- Class activities incorporate significant time for discussion.
- Well-conceived practical and experimental activities
- Textbooks and materials are a positive resource for learning (though not all textbooks are available to students). However, some textbooks:
- lack suitable examples;
- are difficult to understand because of their advanced and unfamiliar vocabulary.
- Some test anxiety caused by:
  - topic unfamiliarity;
  - question difficulty;
  - time pressures.
- Cambridge curriculum more challenging than state curriculum
- IGCSE subject difficulty influences choice of AS-/A-level subjects

AS/A Level

- Fair test of ability (though examination coverage may not always reflect content taught)
- IGCSE provides good preparation for AICE.
- On the whole, stimulating and motivating
- Challenging curriculum prompting more serious study and encouraging development of study skills such as critical analysis and note taking
- Planning and time management skills essential for success
- Requires good writing skills
- Positive washback on preparation course materials (occasional differences between perceived level of difficulty in textbook sample examination questions and actual examination questions, the latter being more difficult)
- More "high stakes" than IGCSE; causes of anxiety include:
  - lack of understanding of questions;
  - unnecessarily complex questions;

Table 2.

Profile of IGCSE Students

Gender	Number	Percent
Female	441	62.0
Male	266	38.0
Total (excluding no responses)	707	100.0
Age (in years)		
Less than 14	4	1.0
14–15	603	85.0
16–17	99	14.0
18 or more	1	0.0
Gender by School		
High School A (n=53, 7.5% of sample)		
Female	33	62.0
Male	20	38.0
High School B (n=54, 7.6% of sample)		
Female	38	70.0
Male	16	30.0
High School C (n=163, 23.0% of sample)		
Female	101	62.0
Male	61	38.0
High School D (n=155, 21.9% of sample)		
Female	95	61.0
Male	60	39.0
High School E (n=284, 40.1% of sample)		
Female	174	61.0
Male	109	39.0
Total (excluding no responses)	707	100.0
Country of Origin		
United States	568	92.1
Ghana	5	0.8
Pakistan	4	0.6
England	2	0.3
Germany	1	0.2
Vietnam	1	0.2
Other	36	5.8
Total (excluding no responses)	617	100.0
Students Studying IGCSE at Time of Survey		
Yes	661	93.0
No	48	7.0
Students who chose to Study IGCSE		
Yes	502	77.0
No	147	23.0
Total (excluding no responses)	649	100.0

Table 3.

Profile of AS-/A-Level Students

Gender	Number	Percent
Female	424	59.0
Male	291	41.0
Total (excluding no responses)	715	100.0
Age (in years)		
Less than 14	1	0.1
14–15	9	1.3
16–17	616	86.3
18 or more	88	12.3
Total (excluding no responses)	714	100.0
Gender by School		
High School A (n=145, 20% of sample)		
Female	82	57.0
Male	67	43.0
High School B (n=127, 17% of sample)		
Female	70	55.0
Male	48	45.0
High School C (n=151, 21% of sample)		
Female	82	54.0
Male	68	46.0
High School D (n=117, 16% of sample)		
Female	77	66.0
Male	40	34.0
High School E (n=187, 26% of sample)		
Female	113	60.0
Male	68	40.0
Total (excluding no responses)	727	100 .0
Country of Origin		
United States	578	91.0
England	4	0.6
Germany	4	0.6
Vietnam	4	0.6
Ghana	6	0.9
Pakistan	6	0.9
Other	35	5.5
Total (excluding no responses)	637	100.0
Students Studying AS-/A-Level at Time of Survey		
Yes	702	97.0
No	25	3.0
Students who chose to Study AS/A Level		
Yes	580	83.9
No	111	16.1
Total (excluding no responses)	691	100.0

- time pressures (test length and time allocation);
- lack of familiarity with Cambridge curriculum;
- high personal expectations;
- implications for future programs of study; and
- fear of failure.

- Perceived benefits of 'partial credit' scoring
- Difficulty studying state and Cambridge curricula simultaneously
- AS-level subject difficulty influences choice of A-level subjects
- Excellent college preparatory value

Teacher Perceptions According to Questionnaire Data

- IGCSE prepares students well for AICE.
- Cambridge exams provide positive washback on preparation courses in terms of content and methodology.
- Cambridge exams provide positive washback on preparation course materials (though some teachers do not believe that all textbooks offer suitable or appropriate support for their teaching, for example, they lack adequate examples and explanation).
- General satisfaction with personal preparation for teaching the course
- Students' understanding of subjects tested throughout Cambridge program
- Challenging courses prompt students to think more critically: Students are required to form opinions and to present their arguments in a coherent, logical manner.
- Cambridge courses:
  - attract high-caliber students;
  - allow teachers to teach highly motivated students;
  - provide positive motivation for students;
  - enable real-world application of subject knowledge; and
  - offer scope to broaden student views relating to global issues.
- Cambridge examinations are considered to:
  - be a fair test of student ability;
  - discriminate effectively between students;
  - significantly influence choice of the content of preparation lessons; and

- significantly influence choice of teaching methodology.

- Perceptions of knowledge required to perform well on Cambridge examinations (other than subject-specific knowledge) include:
  - ability to improvise and think creatively;
  - prior knowledge of examination format;
  - examination practice;
  - good time management skills;
  - good academic skills, including analytical and critical thinking and application of reading and writing strategies;
  - class participation; and
  - personal motivation and conscientiousness.
- Teacher concerns include:
  - insufficient time to cover Cambridge syllabus
  - management of large classes
  - demanding requirement to teach State and IGCSE curricula simultaneously
  - requirement for more support materials and training
  - unrealistic expectations of own teaching performance

Perceptions According to Interview and Group Discussion Data

High School Interviews

- Transition from IGCSE to AICE constitutes a major increase in workload and conceptual thinking.
- AICE is new and exciting compared to other, more established acceleration programs. For example, AICE fosters greater classroom participation.
- Students with experience of both the AICE and AP programs value the Cambridge curriculum more.
- Stimulating and challenging yet flexible programs of study
- A requirement for discursive writing, a skill valued by students (though some concern among students for whom English is not their first language)
- Cambridge essay approach is suitable for eliciting actual ability (though multiple choice is often the preferred test format, particularly among science students).

Table 4.

Profile of Cambridge Teachers

Variable	Number	Percent
High School		
A	4	6.8
B	10	16.9
C	14	23.7
D	10	16.9
E	21	35.6
Gender		
Female	43	73.0
Male	16	27.0
Age (in years)		
30 or younger	9	15.0
31–40	18	30.0
41–50	17	28.0
51–60	12	20.0
61 or more	4	7.0
Number of Years Teaching		
Less than one	4	7.3
1–5	38	69.1
6–10	11	20.0
11–15	1	1.8
16–20	0	0.0
More than 20	1	1.8
Total (excluding no responses)	55	100.0
Qualifications (more than one possible)		
Teaching certificate	14	17.1
Post-graduate certificate	1	1.2
Bachelor's degree	23	28.0
Master's degree	32	39.0
Other (Cambridge certificate, distance learning)	12	14.6
Total	82	100.0
Position at Institution		
Teacher	51	82.3
Department Chair	7	11.3
Department Assistant Chair	1	1.6
Examinations Officer	1	1.6
Other	2	3.2
Total (excluding no responses)	62	100.0

Continued on Next Page ▸

Table 4.

Profile of Cambridge Teachers

Variable	Number	Percent
Subject(s) Taught		
Mathematics	7	10.8
Science	13	20.0
English/English Literature/ESOL	16	24.6
Modern Languages	6	9.2
Humanities	18	27.7
Thinking Skills	1	1.5
Art/Design/Technology	4	6.2
Total (excluding no responses)	65	100.0
Trained as a Cambridge Teacher		
Yes	39	66.0
No	20	34.0
Experience Teaching Similar Level Offered by Other Assessment Agencies		
Yes	29	51.0
No	28	49.0
Total (excluding no responses)	57	100.0
Choose to Teach Cambridge Courses		
Yes	37	68.5
No	17	31.5
Total (excluding no responses)	54	100.0

- Cambridge programs considered excellent preparation for university study (though many non-Florida universities are unaware of AICE)
- Cambridge diploma qualifies a student for Florida Bright Futures scholarship (full tuition at any public school in Florida)
- Strong correlation between Cambridge students and students enrolled in the Magnet Arts program

High School Group Discussions

- Cambridge University is recognized internationally.
- Cambridge programs:
  - provide a substantive, rigorous curriculum;
  - afford opportunities to concentrate on particular disciplines;
  - engender corporate learning, fostering peer competition and teamwork;
  - attract focused, committed students;
  - provide students with opportunities to work with other "high achievers;"
  - assess actual student abilities;
  - provide opportunities for 'hands-on' learning;
  - require careful planning and time management;
  - develop and enhance debate skills; and
  - encourage expressive styles of communicating.
- Cambridge *Thinking Skills* qualification:
  - promotes discipline in approaches to study;
  - prepares students well for writing assignments;
  - improves analytical skills;
  - provides a worldly perspective;
  - develops public speaking tools; and
  - builds a sound knowledge base.
- AICE more adaptable than other acceleration programs:
  - IB is more time-consuming yet less rigorous.
  - AP focuses on a broad range of topics (whereas AICE is more focused on acquiring and understanding a particular subject)
- American colleges recognize AICE; some prefer Cambridge applicants.
- Cambridge credit exempts students from entry-level college classes.
- Cambridge programs tend to focus on vision for further study and future career paths.

University Interviews

- AICE is excellent preparation for university study.
- Colleges and universities consider AICE to have strong predictive utility.
- AICE is valued in the college admissions process.
- AICE study facilitates the transition from secondary to postsecondary education (several students consider them-selves better prepared than AP students for university).
- Students entering 11th grade and beginning the AICE program are less well-prepared for AICE if they do not follow an IGCSE course of study.
- Students following an IGCSE program of study who decide not to pursue AICE (or, alternatively, opt for a reduced AICE course load) do not appear to have the same success as measured by offers of admission.

- AICE offers flexibility, facilitating more informed choice of future courses.
- Students selecting Cambridge or the IB are challenged to do better because of the nature of the programs.
- Florida public schools recognize AICE as a demanding curriculum, and all give credit for it. However, while admissions office personnel are familiar with AICE, faculty academic advisors and student peer advisors may be familiar only with AP and the IB.
- Some content of freshman-level classes is covered in the AICE program.

Perceptions According to Classroom Observation Data

- Ethos of focused activity within a coherent, learner-centered, institutional approach to preparation for Cambridge examinations
- Range of ideas and approaches to facilitate learning
- Importance of the teacher: opportunities for students to communicate vary, with teacher attitude a particular influence
- Well-prepared but flexible teaching in terms of a learner-centered pedagogic model
- Classroom methodologies characterized by eclectic approaches
- Teachers able to stimulate critical thinking
- Excellent lesson planning, classroom management, and delivery
- Creative use of study materials, including endorsed textbooks and other instructional materials
- Active engagement of students in discussion (particularly true in English classes, where students consistently engage in interactive discourse with teacher and peers)
- Occasional student-led class time within lessons (particularly within social sciences)
- Intense learner environments within mathematics and science classes

CONCLUSIONS

The current research—presented from the perspective of an international awarding board investigating the impact of its examinations—suggests that Cambridge assessments are:

- direct tests of the program's intended skills, knowledge, and understanding;
- appropriately designed to elicit skills, knowledge, and understanding;
- preparation for Cambridge assessments appears to encourage a positive and collaborative learning experience allowing students opportunities to communicate and contribute;
- challenging, particularly when compared with other acceleration mechanisms;
- engaging students intellectually;
- encouraging good study habits;
- fair, on the whole (despite some students' claim that all tests are unfair);
- high stakes (particularly AICE) and thus causing some test anxiety, though this does not appear to distort examination results;
- encouraging instruction that motivates and satisfies students because of its focus and the range of relevant
  - *activities* (particularly interactive, communicative ones);
  - *skills* (particularly writing and speaking); and
  - *materials* (inspired by the content of the Cambridge examination itself).
- fostering eclectic pedagogical and methodological approaches;
- positively influencing *choice* of methodology for preparation lessons;
- positively influencing *content* of preparation lessons;
- providing positive washback on preparation course materials; and are
- Assessment content and demand appears to successfully prepare students for postsecondary programs of study (particularly freshman-level studies).

As in similar education research projects, one of the primary challenges is to determine whether an impact has been made. The challenge for any researcher is to differentiate the effects of the test from other effects, such as changes in teacher or learner characteristics, curriculum reform, or teacher training. This may be accomplished by hypothesizing as to the impact of the test on different areas (*e.g.*, methods, content, "depth" of teaching/learning). Dependent variables might include the effects of the test on participant attitudes and beliefs, content and methods of teaching, and learning and course outcomes. These

should be measured in relation either to a baseline or to alternative concurrent settings.

To evaluate outcomes, alternative measures of criterion abilities are required to compare to the test results, as improvements in test scores may be merely the result of 'test-wiseness.' Moreover, it is useful to obtain supporting evidence of the criterion skills from higher education institutions. Future work will seek to elicit the views of staff at receiving institutions as to how examination results are used; general guidance on A-level grades and their usefulness; and recognition of Cambridge examinations, including issues relating to the standard of A level (as compared with similar qualifications), English language proficiency, and assessment purposes.

Other key challenges are the type and amount of data collected. The scale of the impact research program will depend on the availability of data, the practicality (or impracticality) of collecting pertinent data, and stakeholder motivation and engagement in helping to mine richer data from their own contexts.

The present case study is based on opportunity samples of data. Although case study approaches are not above criticism, the method is justified as a mode of situated inquiry preferring uniqueness over generalizability. The number of impact participants in this study constitutes a sample size that compares favorably with those reported elsewhere (see Hawkey 2006.) It also should be noted that student and teacher populations are constantly changing; rarely are they static. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that there ever would be a "perfect" sample of the Cambridge student/teacher population.

Further work is needed (1) to refine the impact instrumentation and focus questions in light of this research and (2) to undertake a more extensive, larger-scale study.

Other, more quantitative sources of evidence can help researchers better understand the test impact. Data currently are being collected to highlight the predictive validity of Cambridge assessments and other student characteristics with regard to preparedness for and continued academic success at U.S. universities.

The predictive research relies on data collected from three years' worth of students enrolled at Florida State University. The data include each student's performance in high school, the education program followed, ethnicity, gender, and first-year college GPA. Multi-level modeling has been applied to investigate the relationships among the variables and to determine in particular which are the best indicators of academic success at university (Shaw and Bailey 2011).

Impact and predictive validity research enable a more in-depth exploration of the relationship between the experience of students in the Cambridge curriculum and the extent of their preparation for college as well as their success in college. This research provides Cambridge with greater understanding of its assessments in terms of "what goes on while a program is in progress" and "the end results of the program" (Weiss 1998). It is hoped that by triangulating the findings of predictive research and impact study findings, "multiple aspects of a single empirical reality" (Denzin 1978) will be revealed.

High-stakes examinations are instrumental in shaping educational goals and processes—and society in general. With international examinations of ever-higher stakes, awarding bodies increasingly must accept responsibility for the influence of their examinations on a broad range of stakeholders and education beneficiaries. Thus, the need to monitor the effects of examinations on materials and on classroom activity as well as to seek information on the views of the full range of stakeholders is accepted by most awarding bodies. Cambridge perceives itself as answerable to a broad range of stakeholders, from test takers and their parents to test-preparation teachers, from test center administrators to education policy makers, and from test-taker receiving institutions to employers.

As U.S. interest in the Cambridge acceleration program grows, stakeholders—particularly students and their teachers—will require a forum in which to ask significant questions about the Cambridge examinations. As a responsible awarding body, Cambridge should be able—indeed, it should be required—to provide the necessary response to these questions.

Given the case study nature of this research it would be unwise to make definitive statements about the impact of the Cambridge program of learning and assessment. However, the study findings together with future impact data collected from a wider range of stakeholders will add to the already growing body of validity evidence in support of Cambridge assessments and their impact on those U.S. stakeholders directly affected by them.

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An Examination of **Program Selection Criteria** for Part-Time MBA Students

Prospective graduate students select a graduate program as a result of a multifaceted decision-making process. This study examines the selection criteria that part-time MBA students used in selecting a program at a private university.

By Michael Colburn, Daniel E. Fox,
and Debra Kay Westerfelt

IN today's climate of economic uncertainty, application rates to MBA programs may have some university administrators concerned. According to a 2010 survey of 327 member schools conducted by the Graduate Management Admissions Council, full-time two-year MBA programs reported declines rather than growth in application volume for the school year beginning fall 2010. Flexible and part-time MBA programs reported approximately equal numbers of growth and decline in applications for 2010 while only executive MBA and full-time one-year MBA programs experienced growth in application volume. The same survey showed that part-time MBA programs in the United States experienced regional variations in application trends, with the strongest application flow observed in the Northeast and the weakest in the West and in the South. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Northeast reported the lowest regional jobless rate in June 2010 (8.8%) and the West the highest (10.7%). As the economic downturn continues and as high jobless rates persist, part-time MBA programs—especially in high jobless rate areas—should not expect significant increases in application rates.

Deciding to apply to an MBA program may be one of the most important decisions a prospective student can make as it directly affects future career and promotion goals. The characteristic profile of a part-time MBA student is the working professional who brings valuable experience to a program; often, he is a seasoned expert in a particular field. Thus, it is not surprising that prospective part-time MBA students approach the process of considering and selecting an MBA program by gathering information over an extended period of time. According to the Execu-

tive MBA Council (2010), 10 percent of students begin considering executive MBA programs more than two years before they apply and 25 percent do so more than one year in advance. Approximately 34 percent consider programs less than seven months before attending.

MBA administrators and curriculum planners must be aware of the ever-changing environment and the need for programs to meet student requirements. Peter Drucker warned in 1997, "Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won't survive." What attracted students to a program 20 years ago is not necessarily what attracts them today. Some universities have heeded Drucker's warning at least in part; how else to explain the apparent shift in business school product offerings away from traditional full-time, two-year MBA programs to more part-time, flexible, and specialized MBA programs (Friga, Bettis and Sullivan 2003)? Peterson (2000) also noted the paradigm shift to part-time students, students who will take longer to complete their degrees, and students who will attend satellite schools.

With the advent of new and modified MBA programs such as online delivery, specializations, and part-time programs, prospective students have more MBA program choices than at any previous time. Thus, selecting an MBA program in which to enroll is a multi-stage process that includes the following decisions:

- the initial decision to attend graduate school;
- in which geographic area to pursue studies;
- whether to attend part time or full time; and
- which college and specific program best "fit."

Prospective students utilize a variety of sources to help them make these decisions. Consider as well that many schools have become increasingly proactive in marketing their programs. Additional information is communicated by current students, alumni, and friends. This first-hand information is authentic (in most cases) and difficult for schools and programs to manipulate.

Despite the importance of all of the decisions that conduce toward selection of an MBA program, this article focuses on those factors the prospective student values most when selecting a part-time MBA school and program. It focuses as well on the impact of "word of mouth" promotion on the part-time MBA decision-making process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors Influencing School Choice

An extensive body of literature relates to school choice decisions at the undergraduate level. Though interesting, it does not purport to explain school choice decisions at the graduate level. In fact, literature regarding the basis of graduate school choice decisions is scarce (Garrett *et al.*1982, Kallio 1995, Kuh *et al.* 1983, Malaney 1988,). The few existing studies of graduate school choice can be divided into three categories: One group of studies focuses on students pursuing graduate studies in multiple disciplines at the master's and doctoral levels; another group of studies focuses on students pursuing graduate studies in multiple business disciplines at the master's and doctoral degree levels; a final (sparse) group of studies focuses on students pursuing MBA degrees. While most of the studies include part-time and full-time students, virtually none has been reported that focuses specifically on school choice decisions relating to the selection of a part-time MBA program.

Studies Relating to Students Pursuing Graduate Studies in Multiple Disciplines at the Master's and Doctorial Degree Levels

In an early study, Malaney (1987) surveyed 1,073 newly enrolled graduate students at a large public research institution in the Midwest. Part-time and full-time students were represented proportionally in the survey. The study found that students applied to the institution primarily because of its academic reputation, cost, and location. (Location was more significant for females than for males.)

Olsen (1992) surveyed 384 students pursuing master's and doctoral degrees at a large midwestern state university. The most important factors influencing students' initial consideration of the university included geographic location and cost. The most important factors influencing students' ultimate decision to enroll at the university included positive interactions with university personnel during the decision-making process and the reputation of the program in the department of interest.

Kallio (1995) surveyed 1,068 recently admitted students pursuing master's and other graduate programs at the University of Michigan. Students' residency, the institution's

academic characteristics, and work considerations had the greatest influence on students' decisions to enroll.

Chen (2007) surveyed 450 East Asian international graduate students enrolled at two Canadian universities. The factors most influencing participating students' choice of the institution included the university's reputation, the quality of the university, the quality and reputation of programs, the availability of financial aid, tuition costs, and location.

Studies Relating to Students Pursuing Graduate Studies in Multiple Business Disciplines at the Master's and Doctoral Levels

Webb (1993) surveyed 1,499 graduate business students enrolled at seven colleges and universities (three small private schools, one large private school, and three large public schools) in Northeastern Ohio to determine the choice factors that were most important in the students' selection of the business schools. Top-ranked factors included academic reputation, time to degree completion, and the school's reputation. The perceived importance of "significant persons" in the candidate's decision-making process also was found to be relevant.

In the "Mba.com Registrants Follow-Up Survey" by the Graduate Management Admission Council (2009), 1,005 recently accepted graduate business students from a number of universities were surveyed regarding school choice. The survey identified six key aspects of respondents' decision making about graduate business program: the quality/reputation of the graduate business school, potential career opportunities, financial costs, program, curriculum, and class profile.

Studies Relating to Students Pursuing MBA Degrees

Montgomery (2002) used a nested logic model to analyze school choice by full-time MBA students at the Wharton School of Business. The cost of the school, school quality, and convenience were found to be the most significant factors in students' choice of a full-time MBA program.

In a 2009 survey by the Executive MBA Council, 2,170 MBA students from 59 schools identified the quality of faculty, reputation of the school, quality of classmates, program format, and school location as deciding factors in their choice of an executive MBA program.

Studies Regarding Word-of-Mouth Influence on School Choice

A company sells a commodity by offering a reputable product at an affordable price. It establishes brand loyalty by staying close to its customers, listening to what they say, and responding appropriately (Olson 1992). Reichheld (2006) wrote in the *Ultimate Question:*

> *Just as detractors have a bullhorn for spreading their negative word-of-mouth, promoters have one for spreading their positive word of mouth. Promoters bring in new people.*

It is commonly accepted that "word-of-mouth influence" stems from an elite few. These "opinion leaders" have an extraordinary number of contacts in their social networks and influence many by what they say and do (Gladwell 2002). Yet some researchers have found that influence by word of mouth is not limited exclusively to so-called opinion leaders (Smith *et al.* 2007): Consumers also rely on word-of-mouth communication from non–opinion leaders (Keller and Berry 2003). One study of product reviews of online purchases concluded that the recommendations of other consumers influence the choices of prospective buyers more effectively than recommendations from an expert (Huang and Chen 2006).

While there is a great deal of research on word-of-mouth influence in the general consumer retail and service setting, little comparable research has been done with regard to the graduate school decision-making process. Research by Bruce and Edgington (2008) found that it was appropriate to apply the findings of word-of-mouth research in the service and retail context to the graduate management education industry—and to MBA programs in particular. The same study concluded that an MBA program's school service quality better predicts the generation of positive word of mouth than educational outcomes. A study of 5,253 pre-MBA students found that 43 percent consulted with current MBA students and 35 percent consulted with alumni as part of their decision-making about pursuing an MBA degree (Schoenfeld and Bruce 2005).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines the selection criteria utilized by part-time MBA students enrolled at a private Midwestern university in their selection of their MBA program. Further, it

Table 1.

Respondents by Campus Location

Campus	Respondents		Part-Time MBA Students (% of Enrollment)
	n	%	
Main Campus	23	29	25
Satellite Campus One	32	41	34
Satellite Campus Two	13	16	15
Satellite Campus Three	10	13	15
Satellite Campus Four	1	1	10

analyzes the methods by which the students first learned of the MBA program.

The authors posed the following research questions:

- What are the factors that affect student selection of a part-time MBA program?
- How do gender, age, years between bachelor's and master's work, and location of campus impact the choice of a program and/or institution?
- What methods do people use to identify graduate programs, and how do gender, age, years between bachelor's and master's work, and location of campus impact these methods?

DATA SAMPLE

Surveys were sent electronically to 160 first-year MBA students enrolled at a Midwestern university with a part-time enrollment of more than 600. Students were randomly selected from the university's main campus and four satellite campuses. Seventy-nine students responded to the survey, for a response rate of 49 percent.

METHODOLOGY

Based on an extensive review of the literature on why students select certain graduate programs, the authors developed a survey that they subsequently administered via *zoomerang*, a web-based survey tool. The survey was sent by e-mail, with the survey link attached, to randomly selected first-year students at the main campus and satellite campuses.

Respondents were asked to rank order on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 being low and 7 being high) the importance of each of the following reasons for selecting Ashland University:

- Location was convenient.
- Cost was reasonable.
- Class times were flexible.
- Ease of application and approval process.
- Curriculum met my needs.
- Availability of online classes.
- It was recommended by someone I trust.

Respondents were asked to answer an open-ended question about the top three reasons for their decision to enroll in Ashland's MBA program. They also were asked to identify from the following how they first learned of Ashland's MBA program:

- Word of mouth
- Advertisements
- University's Web site
- Other (please specify)

Finally, respondents were asked to answer questions about the location of the campus they attended as well as their gender, age, and the length of time that had elapsed since they earned their undergraduate degree.

SURVEY RESULTS

Table 1 presents respondents' campus affiliations and the percentages of MBA students that attend each campus. Satellite Campus One has the largest percentage of students as well as survey respondents.

Table 2 (on page 29) presents data on respondents' gender and the percentage of males and females in the MBA program. Females make up 55 percent of the overall MBA population and 57 percent of study respondents.

Table 3 (on page 29) presents data on respondents' ages and the ages of all students enrolled in Ashland's part-time MBA programs. While 34 percent of the students in the MBA program were between the ages of 26 and 30 years

old, most survey respondents were between the ages of 31 and 39 years old. The median age ranges for respondents as well as for all part-time MBA students were 31 to 39 years old.

Table 4 presents the number of years since respondents earned their undergraduate degrees and the percentage of respondents in each category. Most respondents (30%) had earned their undergraduate degree ten or more years prior to enrolling in the MBA program. The smallest percentage of respondents had enrolled in the MBA program immediately after earning their undergraduate degree.

Table 5 (on page 30) presents respondents' rankings of the criteria they used in selecting an MBA graduate program. The "top three ranking" numbers were attained by counting the number of times a selection criterion received a ranking of 5, 6, or 7 on a scale of 1 to 7 (7 being the highest ranking). The percentages were calculated by dividing the number of "top three ranking" responses by 79 (the total number of respondents). "Ease of application and approval process" had the highest number of top three rankings, followed by "location was convenient," "curriculum met my needs," and "recommended by someone I trust." The "times ranked" numbers were attained by counting the number of times a selection criterion received any ranking. The percentages were calculated by dividing the number of "times ranked" responses by 79 (the total number of respondents). So even though each of three selection criteria ("ease of application and approval process," "location was convenient," and "curriculum met my needs") was ranked high in importance by approximately half the respondents, almost as many respondents did not rank these selection criteria at all. In contrast, the selection criterion

Table 2.

Respondents and All Part-Time MBA Students by Gender

Gender	Respondents		% in Program
	n	%	
Male	34	43	45
Female	45	57	55

Table 3.

Respondents and All Part-Time MBA Students by Age

Age	Respondents		Percent in Program
	n	%	
20 to 25 years	15	19	13.0
26 to 30 years	23	29	34.0
31 to 39 years	24	30	31.0
40 to 50 years	13	16	18.0
51 to 60 years	4	5	5.0
61 years and older	0	0	0.3

Table 4.

Number and Percent of Respondents by Number of Years since Earning Undergraduate Degree

Years since Earning Undergraduate Degree	Respondents	
	n	%
Started immediately after earning undergraduate degree	5	6
1 to 3 years	23	29
4 to 6 years	16	20
7 to 9 years	11	14
10 or more years	24	30

Table 5.

Selection Criteria Ranking MBA Program

Selection Criteria	Top 3 Ranking		Times Ranked	
	n	%	n	%
Ease of application and approval process	40	51	45	57
Location was convenient	35	44	42	53
Curriculum met my needs	35	44	50	63
Recommended by someone I trust	31	39	72	91
Class times were flexible	25	32	47	59
Cost was reasonable	23	29	46	58
Availability of on-line classes	15	19	53	67

Table 6.

Ways in Which Prospects First Learned about the University's MBA Program

Means	%*
Word of Mouth	65
University Web Site	19
Current or Previous Relationship with University	15
Advertising	5
Other	4

* The total percent is more than 100 because respondents could choose more than one response.

"recommended by someone I trust" received some ranking 91 percent of the time. This suggests that when application process, location and curriculum were important, they were very important (as demonstrated by a "Top 3 Ranking"). This also suggests that the selection criterion of "Recommended by someone I trust" is very often (more than 90 percent of the time in this survey) a factor in the decision process people use in selecting a part-time MBA program.

There were no significant statistical correlations with the selection criteria used (or not used) and the gender, age, years since the undergraduate degree and the location of the campus.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

The following is a summary of the responses to the open-ended question requesting elaboration on the top three reasons for choosing this university.

Thirty-one comments were made by the respondents concerning the ease of application. Two major themes emerged. The respondents indicated that not having to take the GMAT was a major plus for this university. They perceived little value in taking the test and were concerned that it would increase the time required to begin their program. This was a major factor in respondents eliminating other programs from consideration. In addition, the respondents made comments on the overall ease and timeliness of the application process and the friendly and efficient way the MBA staff helped them through the process.

Twenty-eight comments were made by the respondents concerning the convenience of location. Two major themes emerged from these comments. Many of the respondents indicated that having the location close to their home was important. A number of respondents also indicated that having multiple campus locations was a benefit, providing them a higher variety of choices in scheduling their program.

Sixteen comments were made by the respondents concerning curriculum. Two major themes emerged from these comments. Many respondents indicated that curriculum variety and the availability of specializations were desirable. Respondents attracted to specific specializations saw a direct connection with their career goals.

Twelve commented that people they knew influenced their decision to enroll at Ashland. One or more had been given "positive word of mouth" by former Ashland MBA students.

Overall, the comments suggested that respondents were influenced most by criteria relating to the admission process, program location, and curriculum. They suggest that respondents need to be convinced of the validity of

admission requirements—specifically, GMAT scores—in assessing their ability to be successful in a graduate program. Respondents also need to be convinced of the relevance of the program's curriculum to their career goals.

Table 6 (on page 30) presents data on the way in which respondents first learned about Ashland University's MBA program.

"Word of mouth" was the most frequent way in which respondents first learned of Ashland's MBA program. This finding was statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. "Current or previous relationship with university" was determined by analyzing respondents' clarification of "other" ways they first learned about Ashland's MBA program. For example, some respondents (or a family member thereof) either had earned their undergraduate degrees from the university or that they were currently employed by the university.

Figure 1 illustrates how the location of the campus (Rural Campus vs. Urban Campus) relates to how students first learned about the university's MBA program. The rural campus (the main campus) is located in a county with a population of over 55,000 residents. T; the urban campus (a satellite campus) is located in a county of more than 1.1 million residents. A greater percent of respondents (77) enrolled at the urban campus first learned about Ashland's MBA programs via word of mouth than did their peers at the rural campus (46). In contrast, 37 percent of respondents enrolled at the rural campus claimed a "current or previous relationship" with the school, compared to 0 percent of respondents enrolled at the urban campus. This finding was statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

These findings suggest that part-time MBA students attending this university favor informal and interpersonal means of obtaining information about university programs.

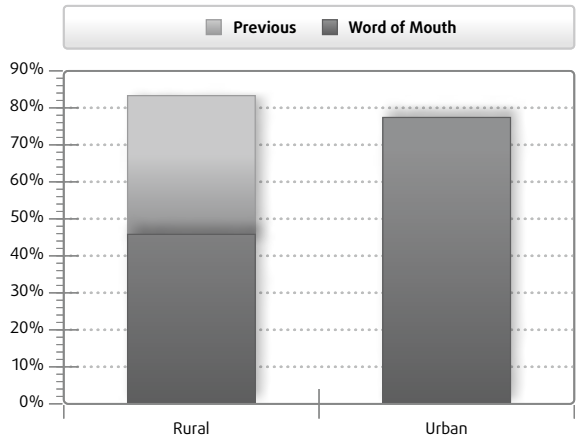

FIGURE 1. *"Word of Mouth" and "Previous Relationship" as Means of First Awareness of Program, by Campus Site*

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions derived from the current study are limited by the scope of the research model: Only one school was studied, and only the perceptions of accepted students who enrolled at the school were evaluated. The results and conclusions could be much different were more schools included in the sample and were accepted students and students who did not attend the school included in the pool of research subjects. Nevertheless, the authors conclude on the basis of this limited study that students value an admission process that does not require the submission of GMAT scores and that relies instead on other objective criteria to predict success in graduate school. Because students perceive the GMAT as cumbersome and as a waste of time that only lengthens the application and approval process, MBA administrators may wish to reevaluate their programs' requirement of GMAT scores, particularly for older applicants whose professional accomplishments may be at least as predictive of success in graduate school as a GMAT score.

Students value an application process that is easy to understand and that can be completed in a reasonable period of time. They also value a process that allows them to speak directly with school administrators who are friendly, responsive, and willing to help them negotiate the application process. Program administrators thus may benefit from evaluating their application process and the support they provide to applicants. Also, because applicants highly value a reasonable turn-around time for application decisions, administrators may want to measure and monitor the amount of time required by the application process and manage it accordingly.

Most of the participants in this study work full time and are already permanent residents in the area of one of the school's campuses. For them, locations that were close to their home and work are a significant factor in the decision

of choosing an MBA program. They also valued the option of attending another campus location because it provided them with more flexibility and variety in course offerings. This suggests that part-time MBA programs should consider the convenience of their location in regards to the distance and traffic patterns from the major employment centers and residential locations in their market area.

Students in this study valued a curriculum that allowed them to select from a variety of courses instead of a rigid and prescriptive approach. They valued the availability of specializations and perceived it as a career enhancement. This suggests that MBA programs that use cohort models and rigid program requirements may be driving students away, especially students wanting to customize their MBA for career advancement.

Word-of-Mouth Communication

The vast majority of participants in this study first learned about Ashland's MBA program via word-of-mouth communication. In the urban market, word-of-mouth communication was even more prevalent than in the rural area. A prior relationship with the school or the prior relationship of a family member with the school was more significant in the rural market than in the urban. Even more surprising was how little influence targeted web-based marketing and advertising had on students' first becoming aware of the school and program. This suggests that MBA administrators should understand the importance of word-of-mouth marketing when developing marketing strategies to attract new students. For example, administrators should perhaps be more attuned to networking with businesses where their student populations predominantly derive from. They may also want to evaluate the effectiveness of traditional advertising and web-based marketing strategies at attracting new students. Finally, never underestimate the importance of student co-worker referrals!

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research in this area should be expanded to include participants from more schools offering part-time MBA programs. Such research should include *all* students who apply, not just those who are accepted. More research also should be conducted regarding adult learners' perceptions of the GMAT as an entrance requirement for a part-time MBA program and their perceptions after completing the program. Finally, more research should be conducted on the influence of word-of-mouth communication on applicants' decisions to enroll (or not) in a part-time MBA program.

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Electronic Transcripts: Past, Present, and Future

By Sarah Harris, Andrew Hannah, Dave Stones, and Robert Morley

In April 2008, AACRAO's vice president for records and academic services appointed an ad-hoc task force to evaluate the current state of technology regarding electronic transcripts. The committee was charged with producing a report that would describe the options that new and current technologies provide for electronic transcripts, note current best practices, and forecast future development.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic transcripts are no longer a concept awaiting definition. They are here to stay. Although paper transcripts remain the standard—at least in terms of volume— an ever-increasing number and eventual majority of students and alumni will expect if not require electronic transcripts. Our obligation to maintain the accuracy and security of transcripts is obvious, absolute, and permanent. Electronic transcripts are just the latest in a long line of technological advances that registrars have embraced at first with caution but then with open arms.

Delivery of paper transcripts by postal or even expedited services is coming to be considered too slow. In fact, paper as a medium for the conduct of business—whether in admissions, financial aid, banking, employment, taxes, social networking, etc.—is fast becoming an anachronism.

Over the last two decades, and particularly during the last eight years, a small but effective set of electronic delivery methods has emerged that supports registrars' transmitting of transcripts. In most cases, the delivery method determines the medium in which the transcript is to be produced (or vice versa).

TWO SCENARIOS

An alumna is applying for a job with a small graphic arts company located in another state. A transcript is needed "within minutes" to inform an interview. An electronic transcript is acceptable, but it must be in a format the personnel director's PC will accept. The personnel director is neither a programmer nor an IT geek, and there's a hefty firewall around his systems. These conditions inform the registrar as to what kind of electronic transcript to produce and how to transmit it.

After attending community college part time for several years, a student is applying to a bachelor's degree program at the state's land-grant university. Although this is a life-changing event for the student, it is a routine business transaction for the community college registrar: Her student system is a member of a network to which all the state's public colleges and universities belong. The transcript that passes

between the two schools is not so much a document as a data file that is compiled, encoded, and encrypted by the community college, transmitted via a secure Internet protocol, then retrieved automatically by the university's systems, which decode and load the data into the student's electronic portfolio in the admissions office.

SUMMARY OF CURRENT ELECTRONIC TRANSCRIPT TECHNOLOGIES

The electronic technologies currently used by registrars for the production of official transcripts are as follows:

- **PDF** (Portable Document Format via Adobe) and other image files (TIF, GIF, JPG) are, in effect, electronic pictures of the paper document. This format allows ease of delivery as attachments via the Internet; as web-hosted unique objects (URLs), they can easily be uploaded into imaging file systems. A drawback is that as "pictures," they cannot easily be "scraped" by automated systems for specific data elements used for filing or subsequent evaluations (*i.e.*, "data mining").
- **Standard Coded Data EDI** (Electronic Data Interchange) in the format developed and maintained by the AACRAO-SPEEDE Committee is an "open-source" format for transcript data output from student information systems. EDI allows one computer to send data to another computer which in turn may process the data unambiguously. This is an excellent method for distributing transcripts to schools, agencies, and other parties within networks or partnerships that use common technological resources for the automated reception, processing, and subsequent evaluation of transcript information.
- **Standard Coded Data XML** (Extensible Markup Language) via the "College Transcript Schema" developed by the AACRAO-SPEEDE Committee is another "open-source" format now commonly available and becoming integrated as "native" into student information systems and other vendor-supplied software. XML can provide a less expensive option for automated evaluation and processing.

This article focuses on EDI, XML and PDF transcript production and delivery methods in postsecondary education, including for transfer student and graduate and professional school admissions.

TASKFORCE WORK AND METHODOLOGY

In February 2009, AACRAO surveyed[1] all of its educational institutional members (admissions and registrars' offices). More than 721 institutions responded: 171 respondents (24%) indicated that they *received* some type(s) of electronic transcripts; 123 (17%) indicated that they *sent* electronic transcripts in at least one format. In spring 2010, the task force followed up with fourteen of the institutions that had commented in 2009 that they "hoped to be exchanging within the year." Three of the fourteen responded; two indicated that they had added electronic delivery to their transcript services.

The task force agreed that by failing to move forward into the era of electronic exchange, AACRAO members limit themselves, their institutions, and the students and alumni they serve.

In January 2010, the Task Force distributed a survey to vendors that provide services related to electronic transcripts. The survey asked a variety of questions ranging from what and how services are provided to cost and pricing models. Specific questions included:

- Does your product require the school to create its own EDI/XML transcript?
- Is software made available to assist the school in creating its EDI/XML transcript?
- Does vendor software resident at the school create the EDI/XML transcript?
- Does the vendor accept transcript data from the school and assemble the EDI/XML transcript at its site?
- Are EDI/XML transcripts sent via e-mail?
- Are EDI/XML transcripts sent via the Texas server?
- Is a network registry of vetted receivers required?
- Is a secure Web service provided such that receivers can receive transcripts?
- Are data sent through some form of secure FTP? Are data encrypted?
- Is a TS131 (acknowledgment) required?
- Can the system deliver to multiple mailboxes at a single school/organization?
- Can the system deliver in batch?
- Can the system deliver in real time?

[1] For the survey instrument and analysis of the results, please go to <www.aacrao.org/About-AACRAO/governance-and-leadership/leadership/transcriptaskforce.aspx> and click on "Final Report."

- Are students notified that their transcripts have been delivered?
- Is the sending institution notified that transcripts have been delivered?
- How long do transcripts reside on servers or in mailboxes?
- Are reporting and auditing functions available?
- Is assistance provided (or can it be purchased) that will interface into a school's SIS?

Because of the proprietary and confidential nature of some of the information requested by the survey (*e.g.*, that related to pricing, copyrighted material, and patented technologies), some vendors[2] were reluctant to complete the survey. Some vendors also were concerned about how their submissions would be compiled, compared, and published.

CONCERNING EDI AND XML

Where EDI allows one computer to send data to another computer that may unambiguously process the data, XML represents the next generation of information exchange between systems, being more web-savvy and eventually cheaper. EDI has a large base of users, thanks to more than two decades of operation under the guidance of the AACRAO SPEEDE Committee. Together, EDI and XML support solutions that are fully automated. They represent a strategic vision to decrease cost and increase speed and efficiency. EDI and XML deliveries are supported by the University of Texas–Austin server, a free service available since 1995 to all education institutions.

SPEEDE AND EDI

The attention given to electronic transcripts over the past several years is considered somewhat amazing by those who have been involved with SPEEDE and EDI. These new services—typically commercial options—do provide opportunities to serve new niches, including deliveries to individuals and companies. But press announcements often tout these products as the "first-ever" electronic delivery systems. They are not. The homely but reliable SPEEDE transcript machinery quietly chugs along, providing security as well as cost and time savings, for a growing number of schools trading transcripts.

The AACRAO SPEEDE Committee was first appointed in 1988. The initial version of the SPEEDE format for electronic transcripts was released in 1990, and the SPEEDE Committee has been developing and promoting student electronic data standards ever since.

SPEEDE works! The University of Texas (UT) at Austin began operating a free standard-format electronic document server in September 1995. As of June 2010, the server has delivered more than 22 million transaction sets, including more than 6 million transcripts, as well as acknowledgments, admission applications, test scores, and requests for transcripts. Hundreds of schools benefit monthly, and these deliveries have not cost those schools a dime beyond the minimal internal costs to deploy the technology.

The UT Austin server delivers huge numbers of electronic documents and files for statewide operations among most of the public schools in British Columbia, Florida, Iowa, Oregon, and Texas. Significant numbers are exchanged monthly in Arizona, California, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Volume has increased considerably in Alabama, Arkansas, and New Jersey and between a few schools in Mississippi, Virginia, and Wyoming. The server delivered 1,071,864 transcripts in 2009—25 percent more than in 2008.

In addition, networks in California, Florida, Maryland, Ohio, New Jersey, and Ontario carry volume transactions not reflected in the University of Texas's counts. Some schools (San Jose State, for example) use both the statewide network and the UT Austin server.

EDI systems in statewide projects enable high schools to deliver transcripts in volume to colleges in Arkansas, Florida, and Texas via statewide mandates. Contracts for statewide service have been signed in several other states.

SPEEDE AND XML

The EDI data standards currently in use were approved through the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). Given the stability of this technology and these formats, the SPEEDE Committee turned its attention to the newer XML schema, which provides a quicker, easier, and ultimately less expensive way for some schools to join the exchange process. SPEEDE and AACRAO chose to use the Postsecondary Electronic Standards Council (PESC) to approve the XML data standards. An XML schema/

[2] For the individual vendors results, please go to <www.aacrao.org/About-AACRAO/governance-and-leadership/leadership/transcriptaskforce.aspx>.

format for the postsecondary transcript (paralleling the EDI Transaction Set TS130) was approved by PESC in May 2004. Another benefit is shared data definitions and structures among testing, transcripting, admissions, financial aid, and the National Center for Education Statistics. SPEEDE Committee members are leading some PESC workgroups' development of additional XML schema for the high school transcript, degree audit data, admission application, reporting, and request/response for transcript. One workgroup is considering ways to embed an XML file in a PDF.

Georgia and Tennessee already have had dozens of schools test XML transcripts, also through the UT server. The XML format is built into the eTranscript California effort, and XML is an option in several other of the commercial opportunities (as, for example, that used in Kentucky). Another exciting development is the beta test status of an XML to EDI converter at the UT Austin server. This should allow newer XML-sending schools to deliver to the hundreds of EDI-receiving schools.

Implementation of SPEEDE-EDI or PESC-XML exchanges either state-/province-wide or within groups of trading partners continues to be an important strategic initiative. Use of standardized formats and codes allows quick production of electronic transcripts in large batches and supports the possibility of near-instantaneous logging, uploading, and evaluation of these transcripts by receiving schools. This sometimes depends on SIS functionality (some have it, and others need to be encouraged). It makes sense that all schools will want to maintain EDI-XML exchanges as a long-term goal.

ONGOING SPEEDE AND XML ISSUES

With the deployment fifteen years ago of the UT Austin server, "the problem" was solved...for about ten years. With near-zero delivery cost, schools had a system for exchanging transcripts with a single site registration per school, multiple supported delivery methods, privacy enforced by encryption, and no need to worry about which network trading partners were using.

Then the scope of the project changed, and many of the "problems" from the 1980s and 1990s re-emerged. EDI/XML was not pervasive, even for school-to-school exchanges, due to SIS lags, lack of large-volume trading partners, institutional development and integration costs (which truly were minimal), and other factors. Attention also came to be directed toward the large number of transcripts sent to individuals and businesses and the wish for fast, secure delivery.

SPEEDE and the UT server strove to be ahead of the curve. Their solutions continue to represent best practice ("best fits," as this report details) for many institutions exchanging transcripts. Meanwhile, new technologies have allowed services to be developed for other niches. These new methods are promising. As SPEEDE has guided EDI and PESC XML to be "team players" with AACRAO, so it is hoped that the technologies that have developed mostly outside the SPEEDE domain likewise "play well," working alongside, complementing, and in all likelihood eventually being integrated with EDI/XML solutions.

PDF TRANSCRIPTS

The ubiquitous Adobe Acrobat® PDF reader software that comes with every new PC or Mac established a common platform for reading electronic transcripts—no matter which school they came from (as long as they were saved as PDFs)—and indicated a common methodology for inserting levels of security and authentication into the process of transmitting and receiving documents. Most current versions of vendor-provided student information systems can print a transcript to a PDF. Registrars have determined that this technology can be integrated with transcript business practices, and several vendors have established services to enable its use on a large scale.

- *Simple* benefits of PDF transcripts: They are cheaper than hardcopy transcripts, requiring no paper, printers, toner cartridges, postage, nor the salaries of clerical staff to handle the above. Moreover, PDF documents can be saved indefinitely.
- *Advanced* benefits of PDF transcripts: They can be distributed securely via the Internet and soon will be embedded with XML, allowing "header record" data for routing. Student information systems can generate and distribute PDF transcripts automatically.
- *Obvious* benefits of PDF transcripts: They are the simplest type of electronic transcript to produce and can be delivered to anyone anywhere with a PC or Mac. More and more recipients *want* electronic transcripts. By asserting and demonstrating that PDF transcripts generated by registrars and their SISs can

(and should) be considered "official," vendors will assist in their production and delivery in a certifiably secure manner. Some schools have implemented PDF solutions for official transcripts (without utilizing vendors) through their own internally supported production and distribution methods.

Clients for PDF Transcripts

The availability of and access to PDF transcript solutions is growing: Vendors with a long history of service to registrars are providing new PDF solutions at either a per "transaction or document" fee, a standing contract rate, or both; in-house PDF solutions are possible if information technology staff are willing to collaborate with registrars. Yet what registrars are not paying for paper, envelopes, printers, toner, maintenance fees, and postage (and labor) they may well be paying for vendors' contracts and transactional services. Those costs may be passed along as a "convenience" fee to students/alumni who order PDF transcripts. Registrars need to carefully weigh their budgets, current expenses (including labor), and the volume of transcripts they are producing against the fees charged by vendors and the costs students should bear for what could be argued are "custom" services.

Although the demand for PDF transcripts is apparent, there are as yet no standards, guidelines, or published "best practices" for their receipt and handling. The different methods employed by vendors in the distribution of PDF transcripts can be confusing. They may include

- two e-mails, one with a URL and another with a password which by copying and pasting allows a user to log in to a secure URL containing the unique content of a PDF transcript;
- logging into a secure "virtual" mail folder for which the recipient must set up a password-protected secure account; or
- no special security features at all beyond the assertion that if the PDF is retrieved from a URL with a specific domain in its address, it must be official.

Registrars who produce PDF transcripts and admissions officers who receive them should work together to establish recommended technologies (plural) for their schools. As for the third set of clients—students and alumni—the application forms they complete and the instructions and FAQs they read should indicate preferred methods and addresses for them to communicate to their registrars as they order electronic transcripts. If a single electronic standard is required (as is common), then instructions must be provided should the sending institution be unable to comply. Instructions and FAQs should never direct the requestor to comply with only one technology or standard.

CURRENT PDF TRANSCRIPT SOLUTIONS

As of October 2010, three models for PDF transcripts were common:

- *Internal:* The school generates and transmits them to designated recipients via secure Web service (https) using unique URL and password combinations e-mailed to the recipients. The transcripts are considered official only as they are delivered, not for subsequent copying or sharing, etc. The provenance of the original URL domain establishes the authenticity of the document. Beyond that, the receiver must testify to that authenticity as the document is moved "downstream."
- *"Virtual" Mailbox/Exchange Partnerships:* The school establishes that its vendor has a "partnership" arrangement with the school/agency to which the transcript is to be delivered. A transcript is generated and securely delivered to a virtual mailbox maintained by the vendor for the recipient school. Employees or systems of the recipient school, either upon e-mail notice from the vendor or by routinely checking the mailbox, retrieve its contents and then file or route the PDFs internally as needed.
- *Direct Distribution to Individuals:* The school generates a PDF transcript and delivers it along with the e-mail address of the recipient to the vendor. The vendor notifies the recipient that the transcript is waiting, usually separating into two e-mails the unique URL for the PDF and the password needed to open it.

Any of these solutions can accommodate PDFs that are digitally signed—that is, where proprietary technology embeds hidden security features and permissions into the data stream of the individual PDF so that recipients can confirm its authenticity and any alterations either are immediately apparent or cause the PDF to be unreadable.

Vendors now are providing turn-key suites of e-transcript services featuring PDF transcripts: They host the ordering of transcripts as student log-ins to their campus portals are authenticated and transferred to their servers. They accept credit card payments. They connect with the school's SIS to submit the order information (perhaps via XML) and then receive the PDF transcripts from the SIS. Some arrange for the PDFs to be digitally signed. Finally, they deliver the PDFs to the designated recipients. For the registrar, the reduction in staffing and logistical costs is significant.

ON SECURITY

The most secure transcript is the one that never is sent. Registrars must be confident that the electronic technologies utilized to create and distribute transcripts remain as secure as traditional technologies. In fact, this comparison is a canard: Traditional technologies actually lack in comparison to electronic methods. Consider the paper transcript that is lost without the registrar or the requestor ever becoming aware. A paper transcript can be altered, particularly if it is "unofficial." We still hear of third parties accepting—even encouraging the submission of—"unofficial" transcripts. All of the special features that registrars have added to paper transcripts—latent images, chemical agents, impressed seals, hologram stickers—are for naught if the receiver of the transcript doesn't know to expect them. Never mind the clever forgers (of which there are many) who provide attractive yet bogus alternatives.

Transcripts should never be sent or accepted as unencrypted e-mail attachments. Beyond that, any method for securing electronic transcripts should be audited and approved by the institution's IT security units. Even given the well-documented protocols of EDI/SPEEDE, routine internal audits should be conducted to ensure that all PCs, servers, and networks within the institution are secured. Registrars should request from vendors documentation relating to the independent audits they have had done on

their systems; such documentation should be scrutinized in turn by the institution's IT security professionals. *Registrars must partner with their IT colleagues.*

Standard procedures: All new registrar and admissions office and IT staff with access to transcript data and transcript-ordering software and related hardware should undergo a background check when they are hired. They also should be required to sign "appropriate use" statements relating to data and software access. FERPA training—including annual "refreshers"—should be standard operating procedure.

FERPA: How does any electronic transcript solution comply with FERPA? In short, FERPA is neutral on the subject of electronic transcripts and technologies used to distribute confidential information. Nevertheless, it specifies that students must properly authorize the release of transcripts; such authorization may be established via a properly administered electronic signature. Given registrars' obligation to maintain the security of the confidential information with which we are entrusted, we should be overly zealous in ascertaining how that level of security continues—or degrades—as the electronic transcripts we produce travel through the Internet. Our obligation is to deliver transcripts in an adequately secure manner as authorized by students to the specific parties they have indicated. If we are not convinced that manner is sufficiently secure, then we cannot release the transcripts. *Any electronic transcript plan should be reviewed by an institution's legal counsel before it is implemented.*

Technical standards: Considering the technical security applied to each step of the electronic transcript process is a constructive task that again requires consultation with IT professionals. Each of the following steps may require a unique security protocol:

- Student log-ins to the campus portal, including the initial distribution of network IDs and passwords
- Web forms for ordering transcripts
- Uploading or transcribing orders to SIS
- Security of SIS
- Security of PCs used by registrar's office staff
- Network environment and firewall of the institution
- Network security as order information and e-transcripts (EDI, XML, PDF) are transmitted to vendors
- Security of the vendor's hardware
- Security of the vendor's software
- Optional use of digital signatures for PDF transcripts
- Receipt acknowledgments for EDI/XML transcripts
- Communications among schools, vendors, students, and recipients
- Transaction logs of all of the above steps

THE BEST FITS

In considering the types of transcripts, their destinations, the volume produced by individual registrars' offices, and the nature and size of their respective institutions, certain commonalities—what the task force called "best fits"—emerged that informed the electronic transcript technology that likely would be most efficient.

Electronic Sender–Destination Combinations

- *College sends large volumes of transcripts to one or more other colleges or higher education agencies:*

Best Fit = EDI/XML

Likely scenarios include registrars of community colleges and public (and perhaps private) institutions with large numbers of students who transfer to other colleges or universities. These schools may belong to state systems, consortia, partnerships, or other groups whose members routinely exchange electronic information—not just transcripts—for administrative, research, and pedagogical purposes. EDI/XML transcripts are incorporated into this routine exchange of data—in a secure manner—to expedite the movement of student record information from one SIS to another or to an admissions system, mitigating needs for the overhead of transcriptions and paper handling and augmenting assessment of the information for service to students as well as institutional research.

- *College receives many transcripts from one or more other colleges:*

Best Fit = EDI/XML

Likely scenarios are undergraduate transfer admissions offices or scholarship-/grant-providing agencies that routinely receive many hundreds or even thou-

sands of college transcripts. Again, being part of a state system or consortium increases the likelihood that the common software to "decode" the EDI and XML data formats can be integrated with administrative systems. In-house or vendor-provided IT resources are required, but the specialized knowledge of IT staff to support these solutions is becoming widely available.

- *College sends transcripts to individuals or businesses:*

Best Fit = PDF

- PDF solutions are appropriate for schools where large percentages of transcripts go to individuals, usually prospective employers; this is often the case for proprietary or professional schools and where transcripts accompany applications to graduate schools, in which case they likely are addressed to individual chairs or admission committees. These "individual" receivers likely still function with the applicants' transcript "documents" in front of them. The PDF transcript can be delivered directly to an individual and can be viewed and/or printed and used as if it were delivered in a traditional manner. Better, it can be saved with other electronic documents for subsequent retrieval, sharing, or archiving. Security of the PDF remains as important—if not more so—than that of paper transcripts as they are received, copied, shared, and filed.

- *College receives few transcripts from a variety of locations:*

Best Fit = PDF

- Admissions offices receive, unsolicited, electronic transcripts from any number of sources and in all the formats (and more) mentioned in this report. Unless an office wishes to stipulate that only one or certain electronic format(s) will be accepted (in which case it must be prepared to routinely accept that or those formats)—and so to risk alienating prospective students whose current institution is unable to produce transcripts in that or those format(s)—it can't be surprised if transcripts continue to be delivered in multiple electronic formats. Transcripts in PDF are by far the easiest electronic option both for a registrar to produce and for an admissions office to receive and/or retrieve.

- *College sends small volumes of transcripts to many colleges—pending budget and resources:*

Best Fit = Hardcopy or PDF

- *College receives small volume of transcripts from a wide variety of individuals or institutions:*

Best Fit = Hardcopy or PDF

ELECTRONIC TRANSCRIPT "HOME RUNS"

Depending on the core technology a school utilizes for electronic transcripts, the task force envisions two types of "home runs"— the ultimate use of state-of-the-art tools to accommodate students' and institutions' needs for official transcripts. While these constitute pure speculation, each step references a technology now in use by AACRAO members. Combining them into a seamless "package" is how we define the "home run."

- The EDI/XML home run:
  - Students log in to campus portals, authenticate themselves via LDAP, and indicate that they wish to "order transcript."
  - The log-in is transferred to the e-transcript vendor's servers via Shibboleth.
  - Students place transcript orders there and pay via credit card.
  - Order information is transferred to the campus SIS via the XML transcript-order schema.
  - Campus SIS checks for holds and notes if the recipient is listed in a set of "partnered" institutions or is a registered UT server client. If so...
  - An EDI or XML transcript is sent via secure FTP (or https or other secure protocol) to the UT server, where it is placed in the recipient's "mailbox."
  - The recipient automatically retrieves the EDI or XML transcript, which is downloaded into its database and from which evaluations and institutional research reports can be run.

- The PDF home run:
  - Students log in to campus portals, authenticate themselves via LDAP, and indicate that they wish to "order transcript."
  - The log-in is transferred to the e-transcript vendor's servers via Shibboleth.

- Students place transcript orders there and pay via credit card.
- Order information is transferred to the campus SIS via the XML transcript-order schema.
- Campus SIS checks for holds; finding none, it generates a PDF transcript.
- The PDF transcript is sent to the vendor server via secure FTP or secure protocol.
- Vendor may arrange for digital signage security to be incorporated into the PDF.
- Vendor communicates retrieval instructions to the recipient.
- Recipient retrieves the PDF.
- Potential enhancement: As the PDF is generated by the campus SIS, corresponding XML transcript data are embedded into the PDF. As the PDF is received subsequently by the recipient, the XML data can be used to route the document via header information to specific folders or other destinations, and the rest of the XML body can be downloaded into the recipient's database for evaluations and data mining.

FORECASTS FOR THE FUTURE OF ELECTRONIC TRANSCRIPTS

- As more admissions offices/agencies discover the benefits of e-transcripts, they will encourage students/alumni to order them...some to the exclusion of paper.
- As more e-transcripts are requested and produced, registrars will struggle to understand how to be cost effective.
- The marketplace will drive down the costs of electronic transcripts.
- Only a small number of nationwide (or worldwide) vendors with extensive resources (or government backing) or a "killer app" may remain.
- Depending on the number of surviving vendors and their profit margins, the costs to registrars will be affected. If there is competition, we can only hope that costs will decrease (or at least remain low).
- EDI and XML College-Transcript will become standard "currency" for exchanging transcripts between higher education institutions and agencies. "Translators" will convert EDI to XML and back again. An inexpensive medium for distribution, *i.e.*, the Texas server, will be priceless for AACRAO members.
- PDF transcripts will be commonplace for "individuals" (as opposed to agencies and admissions offices) receiving transcripts.
- For admissions offices and financial aid agencies, loading an EDI, XML, or PDF transcript into an electronic portfolio will become standard operating procedure. The transcript will never be printed.
- Registrars, particularly at larger institutions, will be able to produce and distribute all three types of transcripts—hardcopy, PDF, and EDI/XML—simultaneously and seamlessly.

Recommendations

- AACRAO should advocate for the acceptance of electronic transcripts in the marketplace and in the day-to-day business of registrars and admissions officers. The agencies to which registrars send large volumes of transcripts (*e.g.*, LSDAS, AMCAS, NSF, Fulbright-Hays, etc.) should readily accept electronic transcripts and should publish in their application materials directions for submitting them.
- AACRAO should continue its efforts to bring together key stakeholders (registrars, admissions, and IT) to identify best practices and synergies among their respective areas for requesting, producing, receiving, and processing e-transcripts, specifically for undergraduate transfers, graduate/professional admissions, and applications for scholarships, fellowships, and grants.
- The "Registrars Transcript Guide" should continue to be updated as transcript technology evolves; sections on electronic transcripts, including EDI, the Texas server, the XML transcript-related schema, PDFs, and e-transcript security, should be expanded.
- AACRAO should maintain a public registry, accessible via the Web, that lists the official transcript sending and receiving protocols in use by its members. Entries could be confirmed/updated annually. The SPEEDE Committee could investigate and recommend a structure for such a registry. Many e-transcript players—*e.g.* community colleges, technical schools, etc.—are not AACRAO members; their involvement should not be ignored.
- AACRAO should develop and publish guidelines for distributing and receiving e-transcripts. AACRAO members should be encouraged to follow these guidelines as they develop their own e-transcript services. In

a broad sense, this will serve to maintain the level of security and authenticity that registrars are obligated to provide; in a narrower sense, it ensures that the proper individuals and offices and their addresses at each institution are identifiable by whoever needs to know them.

KEY LINKS/REFERENCES:

- University of Texas-Austin SPEEDE: <http://registrar.utexas.edu/speede/> for server, Q&A, etc.
- AACRAO SPEEDE: <www.aacrao.org/speede/> for state progress, state contacts, RIPS (& AACRAO Resource Center)
- *Electronic Data Exchange Primer* (AACRAO 2008)
- *AACRAO Transcript Guide*
- Postsecondary Electronic Standards Council: <www.pesc.org> — watch activities of work groups on this.

Task force members include Judy Cavin Brown, Five Branches University (2008–09 chair); Sarah Harris, University of Iowa (2009–10 chair and task force member 2008–09); Andrew Hannah, University of Chicago (member 2008–10); Dave Stones, Southwestern University (TX) (member 2008–10); and Bob Morley, University of Southern California (member 2009–10). *Note: Some sections of this article reflect information presented by Task Force members at the AACRAO conferences in Chicago and New Orleans.*

For a thorough review of the technologies (including terminology and notes on implementation), consult AACRAO's *Electronic Data Exchange Primer* (2008) and the latest version of the *AACRAO Transcript Guide.*

About the Authors

SARAH HARRIS has served at the University of Iowa for the past 24 years, the last nineteen years in the Office of the Registrar where she currently holds the position of Senior Associate Registrar. She serves as the coordinator for the transcript division and is actively involved in the discussions of new technologies and how to use them, especially as UI builds a new student records system. She has attended eight AACRAO annual meetings since 2002 and has been a presenter over the last five years. In 2008, she joined the Student Academic Records committee in Group III: Records and Academic Services where she served for four years. Active also in UMACRAO (Upper Midwest), she currently holds the position of secretary and has presented at those conferences.

ANDREW HANNAH has served the University of Chicago as Assistant, Associate, and Acting Registrar during the last 30 years. In that capacity, he was integral in many of Chicago's innovative developments related to transcript security and technology, including security paper, online ordering, electronic signatures, and especially the many variants of "E-Transcripts" which include PDFs, and XML. Active in the CIC (Big Ten) Registrars Group and a founder of the Chicago Area Registrars Group, he is also a frequent presenter on registrar issues at AACRAO and AACRAO-Tech, including several workshops on E-Transcripts. During AACRAO-Tech at Reno in July 2011 he served on a panel discussing the future of the registrar profession.

DAVE STONES managed the Student Information Systems staff at the University of Texas from 1979 to 2000, and has been Registrar at Southwestern University since 2000. He has served on numerous AACRAO committees, including the initial SPEEDE Committee, which developed the standard EDI format for electronic transcripts and applications. He coordinated the first two AACRAO Technology Conferences in 2003 and 2004, and has served as President of both SACRAO (Southern) and TACRAO (Texas).

ROBERT MORLEY has served as Associate Registrar at the University of Southern California for the past 30 years. Active in PACRAO and AACRAO, he served as the first Vice President for Information Technology in both organizations, served on and chaired the SPEEDE committee, served as the AACRAO representative to PESC (Postsecondary Education Standards Council) Board of Directors, and was a participating author on the past two AACRAO Academic Record and Transcript Guides as well as the 2010 AACRAO Retention of Records Guide. Mr. Morley has made well over 100 regional and national presentations on such topics as applied technology, FERPA, and scheduling, among others.

My Management Epiphanies (Don't Wait as Long for Yours!)

By Karen P. Gualtieri

I never planned to work at a college, but I find I am vice president of student development at a community college; I served previously as assistant to the dean of academic services, as registrar, and as dean of enrollment management. I started my career in health care administration, and my master's was in public administration, so my only higher education experience was as a student and graduate research assistant. Consequently, I started every new position in the community college with a sense of "Oh no, what have I done? I really don't know anything about _____!" Over the years, that blank has been filled with such topics as legacy system conversions, FERPA, supervising clerical and professional staffs, faculty loading, optical imaging, commencement ceremonies, admissions, enrollment management, student involvement, disability services—the list goes on.

I survived my own ignorance by treating those topics as if they were subjects to be learned by reading files, books, and articles; attending conferences; contacting experts at other colleges who were willing to explain things; and applying the critical thinking skills that are the hallmark of a college education. Lately, however, I have realized that the key to success in higher education administration is not only learning subjects but also consistently applying some basic management strategies. Thinking through those strategies led to four epiphanies:

MODELING IS MORE THAN LOOKING GOOD

The adage "Lead by example" is accurate. Your staff will learn more from the attitude and behavior you model than they will from anything you include in a procedures manual, memo, or training seminar. While all of those things are important, none is as fundamental as the type of worker you are.

Are the phones ringing off the hook because the office is short staffed? Answer a phone. Is the line for a particular service long during the first week of classes? Stop and do triage: See if you can answer simple questions, or direct students to the office or person they really need to see. Is the brochure rack empty and every clerk working with students? Fill the rack. Did a department representative fail to show up at an open house, and prospective students are asking about the program? Man the department's table. Are these things your job? No, and they shouldn't be your ongoing responsibility. But if everyone is working hard and simply can't do anything more, help, regardless of the task. *When you do whatever it takes to make the program better, the wait shorter, or the process smoother, you are modeling the behavior you expect from your staff.*

But don't think that only your actions need to be modeled. How you acknowledge successes and failures is also critical. A manager who is quick to blame someone else

for mistakes but takes all the credit for successes sets a very poor tone for subordinates. In that kind of atmosphere, no one wants to be responsible for anything because she will pay for it if anything goes wrong, and she will get no benefit if it turns out well. Staff tend to "hide" their mistakes, so that what could have been handled in relatively short order can mushroom into a disaster. *So admit when you are wrong, ask your staff for suggestions, and reverse or modify a decision you made if that is the right thing to do.*

Finally, praise and recognition are not finite commodities to be hoarded. If someone on your staff is responsible for a project's success, tell the world! A competent, well-respected staff makes you look good, and citing their names in reports to management, at staff meetings, or at faculty gatherings makes them want to continue to do good work. If you work with a colleague on a project that is successful, be sure to give her credit for what she has done, or at least acknowledge her contribution in a general way. *Giving credit when it is due demonstrates that you are confident enough in your abilities to share the stage.*

TALENT SCOUTS AND CASTING DIRECTORS AREN'T ONLY IN HOLLYWOOD

On rare occasions, you may be so fortunate as to have enough staff, each qualified to do his job. Or, if you are like most of us, that will never happen. (Wishing it were so will not help you; it will only drive you crazy!) Your only alternative is to carefully consider the talent that is available, and recognize that everyone (excepting perhaps the hardcore under-performer whom you should be trying to fire) has a talent of some sort. The person who has terrible interpersonal skills may be a good data entry operator; the professional who really doesn't like working with faculty or students may have the technical skills to query the database and work through the problems that inevitably accompany SIS releases and patches.

Then consider the work that needs to be done. While you must bear in mind the basic tenets of "position descriptions," there is wiggle room even in unionized environments—especially if you have more than one employee in a particular job category . Focus on the tasks rather than the positions, and try to match the tasks to the talent pool you have. Make adjustments gradually, and be sure that everyone understands that any changes in what they are doing are because they have the skill set required for their new task. If you keep the changes consistent with the type of work your staff are paid to do, they usually will respond positively. (After all, you are recognizing their talent and asking for their help!) In most cases, people are good at something because they enjoy it. So aligning work with staff members' strengths tends to make them happier over the long term.

Differentiate the staff member who quickly and competently completes assignments from the staff member who takes all day (or longer!) to complete a project so she will look too busy to have to do something else. An employee who isn't afraid to try something new or even to make a decision has the makings of a good manager. Find ways to mentor and reward her.

CUT YOUR LOSSES

Even the best manager makes bad decisions. Given the information available at the time, you made what clearly seemed the right decision—perhaps to revise a procedure, recommend a new policy, or hire someone to fill a position. But new information often comes into play, unexpected consequences arise, or the world's greatest candidate during the interview cannot deliver what he promised. Everyone understands that these things happen. *As long as this does not routinely happen to you*, you can turn the situation around by analyzing what went wrong and taking corrective measures.

There is no standard time frame you should allocate to a project or an employee before admitting that changes need to be made. On the one hand, be careful that you don't have a knee-jerk reaction to everything that goes wrong; if you do, you will be changing your mind so often that staff will become confused, and you'll gain a reputation for being unfocused. On the other hand, do not let your need to be right or to save face keep you wedded to a course of action that clearly is not working.

For projects and procedures, determine whether the concept or the execution was the source of the failure. If the concept was poor, then allowing additional time will not make things better. If the execution was poor but the concept basically sound, then time and minor adjustments may be sufficient to salvage the situation. Cut your losses more quickly on bad concepts than on bad executions.

A similar situation exists for "bad hires." If the problem with the new employee is one that training or mentoring

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can remedy, then take the time to work with the person. However, if the person cannot get along with anyone, cannot complete a project, or repeatedly makes bad decisions even though you have clearly explained ways in which she needs to improve her performance, then cut your losses quickly! Not only is the employee not getting the job done, but she also is hurting your reputation as a manager and making the work environment unpleasant (at best) and unproductive (at worst) for others.

DON'T LET THEM TAKE YOU HOSTAGE

One of the first things you should consider as a new manager is sitting with everyone you supervise to find out what it is they do. Learn how to process an admission application, register a student, evaluate transfer credits, image documents, etc. You don't necessarily need to be the fastest or the best at the task, but you do need to understand what it takes to do the work in your area. If you don't know these details, you can be "held hostage" by your staff or by other managers.

Hostages are at the mercy of others. Is the volume of work really so overwhelming that it cannot get done without additional help? Or is the process so cumbersome that what should take three minutes takes ten minutes? If you don't understand how your office functions, you will have to rely on what your staff tells you. At a meeting, another manager may surprise you by making a convincing case for moving some of his office's current functions into your area. Can you respond immediately and convincingly either for or against the proposal? If you understand your area, you have a good chance of knowing whether this would help your area or be overly burdensome. If you don't really know the details of how your office works, you likely will reply with the default statements "already overworked" or "I'll get back to you"—responses that may not be your best options.

KNOW WHEN TO QUIT

Because I now supervise a number of new deans and directors, I am giving a lot of thought to what type of advice I should be giving them. So I am certain that the epiphanies will keep coming. But I also am certain that you are busy and don't have time to read articles that ramble on. So I'll stop here and hope that these four epiphanies will serve you well!

About the Author

KAREN P. GUALTIERI has served at Rockland Community College, a unit of the State University of New York, as Registrar, Dean of Enrollment Management, and Vice President of Student Development. Previously she worked at Orange County Community College as Assistant to the Dean for Academic Services and as a Management Analyst/Health Care Planner with the Veterans Administration. She received her Bachelor of Arts summa cum laude and her Master's of Public Administration from Ohio State University.

Making a Difference: Lessons Learned, Advice Given

By Gary L. Kramer

When it comes to giving advice, I agree with colleagues who have stated that although we might give advice to aspiring professionals, it would be better yet if we would write or apply it to ourselves! So within that context, I, like my colleagues, do not claim to possess superior wisdom in student services. Rather, I claim that I have simply "toiled strenuously, conscientiously, and long enough to partially qualify as experienced in the field." (Please read James Appleton *et al.*, "Pieces of Eight..." for further insights from those who have toiled as leaders in student services.) My work has matured through the influence of those who have taught me to reach higher and surer in service and to keep perspective. Otherwise, I would not be writing this article.

I summarize my experience and advice in the following paragraphs. Certainly, there is no universal solution. What works for one may not necessarily work for another. But based on the aggregate of experience that resulted in the general guidelines provided below, individuals can adapt. Often, the best we can do is to decide on the best principle(s) of practice and move forward to integrate them into our personal style of management and personality until we gain confidence in and success with our work. When we are focused on student development and success, we cannot go too far amiss. After all, there is so much good work to be done that it is almost impossible for us to fail completely!

A BELLWETHER

Early in my career, Sara Looney, of George Mason University, introduced me to the notion of *bellwether*. I've tried to embrace it in my work ever since. I hope that you, too, will find it valuable as we consider "Making a Difference: Lessons Learned, Advice Given."

The term *bellwether* comes from the traditional practice of placing a bell around the neck of the sheep that leads the herd, thereby making it easier for others to follow. Now the word typically is applied in terms of leadership, as *influencing others to follow worthwhile standards and trends.* In today's vernacular, it is "making a difference" or focusing on "what matters most." Applying this definition, I would venture to say that making a difference in the field of student services is all about fostering a culture of success for students; in my view, this leads to personal and professional development and to campus-wide success .

BELLWETHER QUALITIES

Whether we seek to foster student success in the campus community or to find success in our professional endeavors, I have identified five characteristics of *bellwethers* that

I believe are integral to making a difference in student services. The personal lessons I've learned and the advice I have to give are framed by "the five Cs" of bellwethers. Bellwethers are:

- committed;
- caring;
- collaborators;
- completers; and
- change makers.

I've also framed these bellwether characteristics around the following questions, which may prove helpful as we seek to make a difference and find success in our work:

- As you seek to move beyond the routine or expect to actually create and achieve a student-centered environment or culture of student success, what good models have been identified to emulate for both personal and program practices?
- What are the core characteristics found in successful individuals as well as in the programs they administer?
- What does research suggest as the next steps to consider and focus on to promote student success and development, *e.g.*, what do student services providers need to do better in order to align expectations, connect services, actively foster student development, and consistently achieve results through student-oriented services and programs?

Bellwethers are committed to student success and development.

First, bellwethers are committed to students' development and success. They seek to revitalize the academic community by maintaining a process of constructive response to new needs. They focus on what is working and what is not—questions that have been and always will be a primary focus of successful administrators.

Although they may find it challenging to do so, bellwethers must put students first as partners in the learning enterprise. They must recognize that students' success and their own success are directly aligned—like collaborative partnerships. Student services professionals must always consider how to more effectively engage students in examining the alignment of their expectations and experiences with the claims of the institution. Only then can we go and do what William Butler Yeats described in this challenge: "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire of learning."

Bellwethers care.

A good friend of mine, John Gardner, asked an assembly of faculty and administrators to reflect on who in their educational journey made a difference or served as a positive role model. Similarly, I ask, whom will our students remember long after their college experience is over? Whom will they remember as having made a difference in their lives, as having put them first, and as having enabled and ennobled them to achieve success?

Who helped you make the connection between your personal and academic lives? What was the defining moment for you? My guess is that this person cared about you. Long after you forgot the information and advice the individual gave, you likely remember the gift of self—perhaps the most detectable and memorable part of our professional work.

Bellwethers collaborate.

Bellwethers foster the success and dignity of each person in the campus community. Truly, it takes a campus to raise a successful student. I believe in teamwork. Coordination and collaboration are essential, especially when organizational lines are flattened in order to achieve the most important goal: student success. (What objective must a campus community undertake immediately upon students' admission other than to contribute unceasingly to their success in attaining their academic goals?) To "flatten" academic resources through campus collaboration is to enable students and others to contribute to the effective management and wise use of student services. To be successful, we must focus on shared responsibilities and partnerships. We can learn from one another, especially when we consolidate our services in support of student success.

Educational demographer Harold Hodgkinson observed that the key to promoting student success on campus is to know the students who are entering and to monitor their progress. Constant effort is required to adjust and balance student services—to include providing purposeful direction and placing students on a more successful track when services are not working well.

Bellwethers are completers.

Bellwethers are initiators and innovators more than responders and imitators. They complete what they set out to do because they methodically develop—in concert with others—a plan or strategy to improve services; in addition, they participate integrally in executing the plan. Bellwethers also recognize that funds for new programs almost always come from old programs; few receive new money.

Bellwethers believe (as Will Rogers did) that even those who are on the right track will get run over if they just sit there. Accordingly, bellwethers are purposeful in their work, *i.e.*, aligning institutional claims consistently and persistently to determine how current services are and what is of most value to students and the campus. Bellwethers are completers because they consistently and persistently engage stakeholders—including faculty, staff, students, and campus leadership—in focusing and integrating student services that meet the claims or expectations of the institution.

Bellwethers are change agents.

Bellwethers view themselves as more than managers of services and controllers of behavior. Rather, they are policy strategists who use a set of administrative principles as well as technology and data to make informed decisions. They actively incorporate their own confidence, competence, and integrity as well as that of their colleagues.

Knowing he was terminally ill, Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University, wrote *The Last Lecture,* encouraging others to overcome obstacles and seize the moment to do what matters most. Essentially and reflectively, Pausch asked his audiences, "If we were to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?" Similarly, he asked what we would want our narrative to be five years from now. What creative energy and ambition would we need to summon now to initiate progress for improvement—in our case, to make a difference in our work as student services leaders? In the end, what will *our* narrative as bellwethers be?

CONCLUSION

If I were asked to provide a baker's dozen of lessons learned and advice given on the basis of more than four decades in higher education, it would be something like this:

- Be loyal to your institution. *Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts,* but loyalty will always be counted.
- Remember that good teachers/mentors are scholars, and good scholars are good teachers/mentors. Wisely and productively use research and data to inform decision making.
- Foster student development and success while emphasizing and empowering through shared responsibility. "Translate ideas into events to serve people," said Thor Heyerdahl.
- Don't inhale. Do not take yourself too seriously. Take your job seriously, but not yourself. Smile more often. You'll receive praise, honor, and criticism—probably simultaneously. So learn and don't inhale—at least not deeply. Robert Frost said, "A truly educated person is one who can listen to anything and not lose his temper or his self-confidence."
- Be positive and celebrate successes—both others' achievements and your own accomplishments. Most situations have positive and negative sides. I advise that you take the high road whenever possible. That is, don't get caught up in the thick of thin things!
- Develop a work ethic that leads you to exceed expectations. Be passionate about your work and be open to learning something worthwhile each day even from your mistakes. Mark Twain said, "Good judgment comes from experience, and where does experience come from? Experience comes from bad judgment."
- Recognize and acknowledge diverse learners on campus, and seek to serve a broad range of values and viewpoints; understand the diversity on your campus, and particularly the unique needs of the diverse learners you serve.
- Remember that influence should develop from integrity, honesty, and competency in all matters, great and small. Influence relates to quality of performance, quality of values, the quality of behavior, and the quality of one's treatment and response to others and their needs. *Only the mediocre are at their best all the time*.

BYU Educator Karl Maeser provided this insight and good advice on integrity and honor:

> *Place me behind prison walls—walls of stone ever so high, ever so thick, reaching ever so far into the ground—there is the possibility that in some way or*

another I will escape. But stand me on the floor and draw a chalk line around me and have me give my word of honor never to cross it. Can I get out of the circle? No. Never! I'd die first.

- Don't forget to dream. And while you dream, remember that the true calling of higher education is to create a community that includes the success and dignity of each individual on campus.
- "Flow" (*i.e.*, the optimal experience or success) is something we make happen. But remember: When you teach a bear to dance, be prepared to dance until the bear wants to stop.
- Engage others in decision making so that all "own" the decision.
- Maximize the power of creative tension: Recognize and be prepared to work with a generative and adaptive learning community.
- Build a culture of evidence of success. Assessments that really matter (*i.e.*, that are purposeful) align the institution with its claims for achieving personal and institutional outcomes. Because we value what we measure, institutions and personnel should focus assessment and accountability efforts on what matters to student success.

Individuals who work in student services can make a difference—in fact, a collective positive difference—to their own success as well as to that of students by consistently doing things that matter most. What we do for others—especially students—is returned to us. Student learning, growth, and success are the responsibility of everyone on campus. If we incorporate the "five Cs of bellwethers" into our individual work in student services, we ultimately can foster a culture of success for everyone in the campus community. Ultimately, each of us must determine our own success indicators as well as our objectives for those we serve, all within the context of our resources and time. Each of us must decide what matters most in fostering student success on campus and making a difference. But perhaps the most important question to be addressed is what our "narrative" as student services professionals will be. John Wesley summed up our work in these words:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you can.

As you chart your personal and professional narrative, I hope that the lessons learned and the advice I have given will prove helpful.

About the Author

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Creating a Culture of Success for Staff: Five Lessons

By Lisa Mosele Scully

After finishing my undergraduate degree in English, my first employment was in an academic department at my alma mater. At a large public state institution, the salary scale for non-academic appointees was—and remains—woefully low. Knowing that monetary compensation wasn't the source of staff satisfaction, my chairman made a dedicated effort to create the best work environment possible within the constraints of university regulations.

Initially promising a two-year commitment, I ended up staying eleven years and earning a master's degree in higher education/student affairs. In fact, for several years, each of us in the office—including the entry-level, front-line secretaries—held a master's degree. Why did I (and many of my colleagues) stay in the department so long? As I joined the Office of the Registrar and took on management of a much more numerous staff, I asked myself that question.

The answer was the culture in the office. I knew I wanted to create an environment like that I had just left, where people enjoyed being in the office, even when the work wasn't always stimulating or fulfilling on its own merits. What did I need to bring to establish and then sustain that culture with this new group of people?

My answers aren't news to those who read management literature, but they have a proven track record of more than 25 years. Begin with a foundation of mutual respect; build confidence in the team through mutual trust; strengthen connections through open communication; and always maintain a sense of humor.

James Joyce said that "(c)hildren must be educated by love, not punishment." Only when I became a parent myself did I realize how easily extensible Joyce's quote was to management. As I helped my son build his tool kit for navigating relationships, I realized that respect and trust such as I was shown by my mentor were as critical to my early growth as an administrator as they were to my son's development.

My ability to manage was a given for my chairman, and he empowered me to do so with confidence by providing a general sense of parameters as well as clearly communicated policies. I also was given a framework within which to make my decisions and was trusted to run the department of more than 100 faculty and instructors so the chairman could continue to focus on his own research needs. My chairman never met my decisions with frustration or recriminations. In turn, I established guidelines so that each staff member could succeed at her duties.

We knew that it was okay to make mistakes. Our chairman acknowledged our intelligence, trusted our judgment, and supported and guided us through mistakes as well as the murky waters of administrative minutiae. And

we succeeded, without fear of reprisals or reprimands, because we knew it was safe to make mistakes—especially as we learned from them.

So my first lesson for successful management is to lead from your heart. Talk with your staff. An open door signals that an open mind governs the desk inside the office. Be there; be present for problems of all sizes and from all aspects of people's lives. Celebrate people's successes, both personal and professional, and allow time to grieve when sorrows strike. If you naturally think from the heart, it's okay to embrace that part of your personality. Note, however, that this does not necessarily mean to become best friends with each staff member. It's critical to maintain a professional relationship with those whom one manages. Just remember that 'professional' doesn't have to mean 'aloof.'

Second, whether or not it comes easily, it is critical that you communicate. Trust your staff to understand the challenging issues and to appreciate hearing the bad news from you, before rumors start. Provide your staff with as much detail as is prudent; this shows respect for their contributions and attests to their worth in your eyes.

Another favorite quote is from Frank Hohengarten, who said, "The purpose of management is to create an organization that doesn't need you." Thus, my third lesson is to define your policy boundaries as clearly as possible, arm staff with the technical and political knowledge required for the job, and get out of their way. If you hired well, then you have intelligent people who are capable of great work and who want to succeed. Let them. Micromanaging will not help them learn for themselves, can undermine their self-worth, and may lead to an unmotivated staff.

With regard to staff: Battling the ever-present temptation to check Twitter and Facebook is a challenge that didn't exist when I began my administrative career. One way to work against the enticements of the social network is to make fun acceptable in the office. This is my fourth lesson.

Yet having a sense of humor is not a license to be cavalier about work. Whether it's loading a new application, registering a student, or filing a grade change request, all of our actions impinge on the integrity of each student record we touch. Take the work seriously; just don't take yourself too seriously. Remember that we were hired to do a job—and that when we are no longer employed in our positions, our job will still get done. There may well be a bump or two before the job is accomplished with the same level of proficiency, but it is possible that a new employee's perspective on our work might bring a better result. Simply stated, no one is irreplaceable.

If you can bring some levity to the work—and even laugh at yourself in the process—your employees will embrace even the most mundane tasks. For example, we key entered more than 500,000 grades in our legacy records system twice in a five-day period. Then we sight verified, line by line, each grade that had been entered. Long hours accepting rosters from faculty members and entering and proofreading seemingly endless data could easily have taken a toll on staff morale and accuracy. To "lighten" the atmosphere, we rented a helium tank and tied a balloon to the chair of each person who went "above and beyond" the call. "Balloon-worthy performance" included finding a mistake in the proofing of grades or entering the fifteen-page grade roster we dreaded each term. The balloons floating above the workstations signaled to everyone that staff members were being recognized for their important contributions to the process. After hours, the administrators would break out bags of marshmallows for a ten-minute marshmallow war. You might be surprised at how much tension can be dispelled by tossing a puffy treat at your boss!

This leads me to my fifth and final point: Remember that you are all in the same office, with the same mission, fighting the same fights. Just as no one person is irreplaceable, so the best successes result from team effort. JR Holmes, the 2009 *USA Today's* National High School Basketball Coach of the Year, said, "You'll be amazed what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit."

Your staff are important, individually and as a collective. Respect the gifts that each brings to the office, support those who need your extra effort, laugh with them, and listen. Each one has an important voice. Give each person the tools you'd like to be given, such as gentle guidance and clear expectations, and then get out of their way. As when your children grow and leave home, you'll be prouder of the accomplishments of your staff than you might imagine. And when you've provided them all the challenges your office has to offer, support their efforts to grow in a new direction. Even if you have to start the process all over again with a new employee, the future success of your staff often lies outside your office's front door.

About the Author

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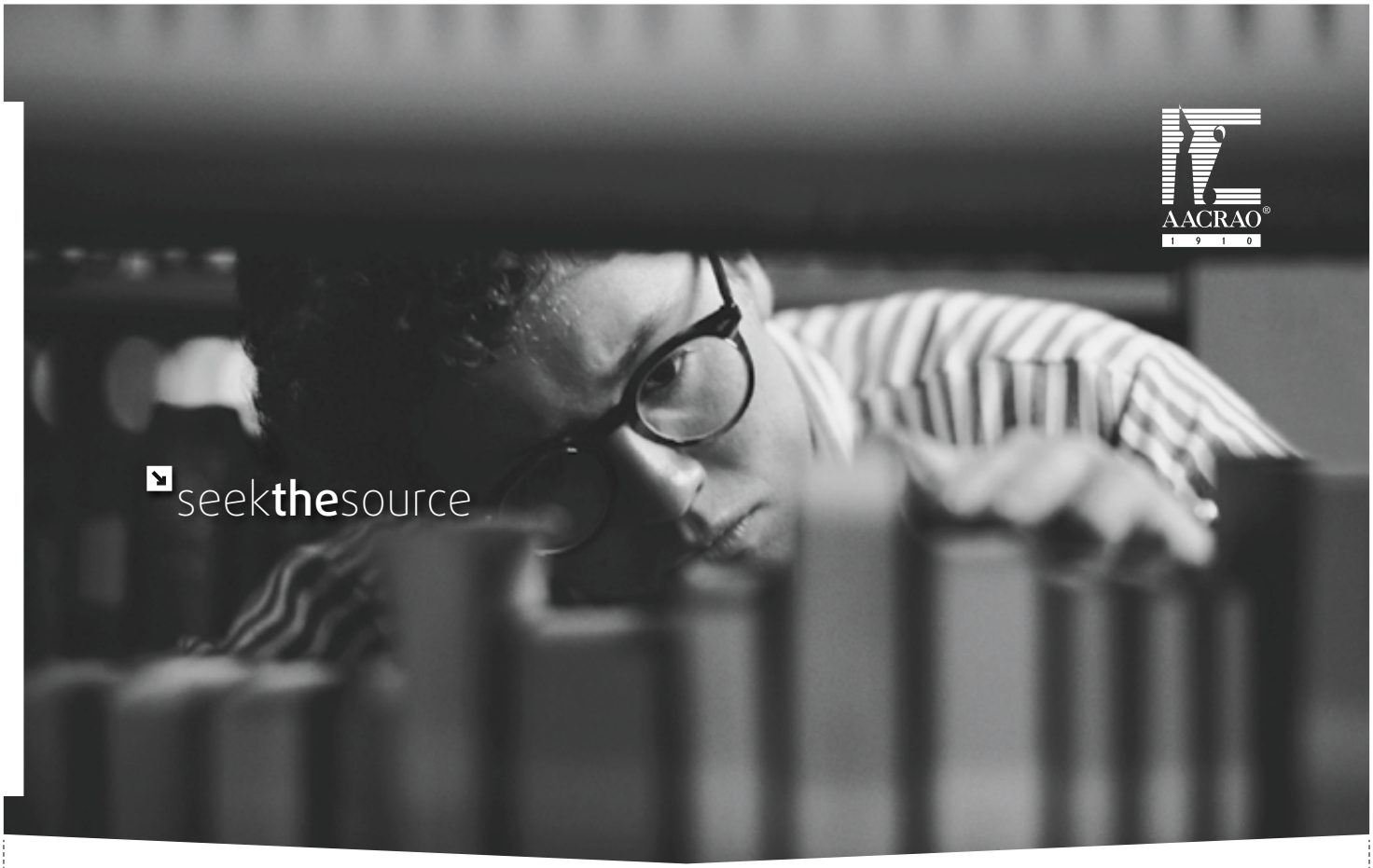

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Graduate Program Scheduling Gains Flexibility through Container Courses: A Case Study

By Richard Rose

There have been times in the history of technology when every last shred of value has been squeezed from an idea. The incandescent light bulb is an example. Humanity pushed its use to the limit, and finally, something more energy efficient had to be found. Science went exploring, and now we are all screwing fluorescent bulbs into our lamps. Research was pulled forward by a practical need. There have been other times when technology was way ahead of our imagination for using it. The laser printer was such a technology. Invented in 1969, it wasn't until 25 years later that a mass market model was available to support the (then) new world of desktop publishing (Reilly 2003). Our culture was thrust forward by a "push technology" which had long since been made available (Umbach 1997).

The Internet is a push technology that has not yet realized its potential in higher education. Universities have made great strides in enlivening online materials with graphics, sound, and video. Our sharpest faculty have knit geographically scattered students into learning communities through blogs, wikis, and all the conveniences of social networking. But when it comes to reconceptualizing how we package courses, semesters, and degree plans, we simply don't "get it" yet. In many ways, we continue to organize our fully online degree programs as if our classes were still convening in Lecture Hall #3 at 7:45 on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The end point in the evolution of the Web delivery of college instruction must be the complete availability of everything we have to offer to any student ready to profit from it at any time (Ross *et al.* 2000). There is little reason that any online course should not be offered in any given semester. In fact, there is little reason to have "semesters" at all, given that online delivery can permit students to begin and finish a course 365 days a year.

What is the "final destination" of this line of thinking? Many disciplines could have fewer traditionally organized courses whereas some might not have any courses at all — at least not as we currently think of them. Common sense dictates that pre-medical students need to demonstrate proficiency in a body of content and skills called "cell biology," and they should not be allowed to progress in their studies until they have done so. The case for linear structure, both within a course and within the sequence of courses that lead to a degree, may be far less compelling in other programs.

Consider a required undergraduate general education course in American history. Few sophomores completing such a course will retain a substantive understanding of the flow of events from the settlement of Jamestown in 1607 to the present, much less the forces that "moved" these events. Gaining such insight is the product of a lifetime

of reading and thinking. It is a process, not an event. If the real goals of the course are to instill a fascination with history, a sense that there are principles that govern it, and an understanding of how much pleasure can be had by immersing oneself in it, it hardly matters that one student meets these goals by diving deep into a cluster of learning objects about the Gilded Age while another is captivated by the American Revolution (Gonzalez-Videgary *et al.* 2009; Hardin 2011). Both should be able to follow their interests and achieve the same goals.

It is self-evident that our society has never been ready to think of the university in this way. In fact, it probably has become significantly less ready to do so as a result of The Great Recession. The current generation of helicopter parents hovers over their children's college experience like never before, with justifiable anxiety about whether all their expenditures will end in the new Holy Grail of parenthood: a well-employed graduate who is out of the house and on his way to career, marriage, and family. Parents often think of college as a set of "treatments" (semesters) with a set of "beneficial products" (courses), akin to a four-year sequence of tooth-whitening visits in preparation for a career in modeling. They want those products to be compounded out of ingredients that have been clinically proven to be effective, that are delivered in a logical order, and that are guaranteed to "do the job" (Cline and Fay 1990). Universities are equally committed to a tight bonding of treatments and results. This is not a bad thing. Like the balloon seller who holds the ends of the strings in his fist so as to keep the balloons from flying away, universities play a necessarily conservative role in society. Ideally, this is balanced by their also being hotbeds of innovation.

Universities believe themselves to be places where knowledge and culture are preserved in an orderly manner, away from the hubbub of fad and fashion. They treasure the egalitarian function they serve by distributing their carefully preserved "cultural capital" to students who may not have access to it through their families or other social institutions (Clegg 2011). That is why universities change their ways so slowly: It is less because of inertia than by design. As large and complex institutions that often are part of larger and more complex state university systems, they would drift into chaos absent a coherent body of rules, standards, and requirements for defining the implementation of their many degree programs. Clearly, the complete reduction of the curriculum into a body of rich self-standing online learning objects would present significant challenges for any university registrar's office.

It is useless to bemoan the fact that the ideal of truly student-centered and individualized university education has not yet arrived. It is far better to do what we can to move our institutions toward individualization within current academic strictures even as we gently push them ever closer to the concept of a college education being as much about self-realization as job preparation (and maybe even the understanding that these two goals are actually very close to being, in fact, one).

THE CONTAINER COURSE IS BORN

Online course delivery makes possible one innovation which can provide each student with greater program flexibility as well as some personal ownership of the direction and pace of his degree progress. We can call this concept the *container course*. A container course is the offering of more than one course simultaneously under a single course number with a non-specific catalog description. It differs from traditional catalog titles such as "Special Projects" or "Independent Study" in that it contains the full content of courses that also may be taught under their own catalog numbers at other times rather than as a unique special arrangement between a professor and a single student.

I suspect that necessity has mothered this invention independently at several times and places in the past. My own discovery of the container course happened in winter 2011. Every year, the Education Department at West Texas A&M University has each professor meet with the department chair and/or college dean to build the professor's teaching schedule for the upcoming semester. Because budget considerations always play a role in which courses may be offered, I had not always been able to get approval for every section of every course I wished to teach. This time, I chose to be last to have the scheduling meeting. I was presented with a fortuitous dilemma: The university was interested in doing more with its summer program, and budget money was available for two more summer classes than the one I had anticipated (provided that they had a healthy enrollment). This requirement was underlined by a new rule that faculty pay for summer classes would be adjusted downward if a certain minimum enrollment was not achieved.

I could think of four classes that had not yet been scheduled; each would be of interest to at least a handful of the candidates in my completely online M. Ed. in Instructional Technology & Design program. (Note that only two courses in this 36-credit program have other program courses as prerequisites.) Given that my program had not offered summer classes for a number of years, I was unsure how many of my students would want to adjust their summer plans to include making progress toward their degrees. I lacked confidence that I could guarantee a good showing for any one of the four courses, but I was certain I could get two healthy classes' worth of participation if I could offer all four at the same time.

Then the light bulb went on: My program had two course catalog listings—"Special Topics" and "Special Projects"—whose descriptions did not narrowly define their content. Would it be permissible for me to offer a Special Topics course containing all the content from "Digital Graphics in Education" as well as that from "Advanced Web Design," with the understanding that students would complete either one set of lessons (component track) or the other? Could I also offer all the content from my online "Social Networking in Education" course as well as that from my "PhotoShop/Illustrator for Educators" course under a single Special Projects course number and provide the students a similar choice? The answer was "yes," and my first two container courses were born.

The mechanics of implementing these container courses could not have been simpler. My university uses the Angel Course Management system. Each semester, the IT department gives faculty an online template ("shell") for each web-based course to be taught. For a course that has been taught before, the professor can import the content from the archived copy of the previous semester's lesson folder and then incorporate whatever updates have become necessary since the last time the course was offered. For each container course, I simply imported the two lesson folders from the previous teaching of each of the component courses that was to be included. I then created a new, combined syllabus for each container course

and prefaced each with an explanatory page about the mechanics of taking a container course; the syllabuses of each of the two source courses were also included. I added a course announcement to each container course's online title page reminding students that they needed to choose—and to stick with—one of the two tracks in each container course they were taking. The container courses were open for business.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF CONTAINER COURSES

Container courses offered several benefits:

Flexibility

Most of my Instructional Design & Technology students seek their degrees to qualify for either a new job or a promotion. Very few simply want to get better in their current positions. They understand intuitively what the economic experts are saying: that the recession is accelerating a shift toward jobs that require ever-increasing levels of education (Carnevale, Smith and Strohl 2010). These students have considerable "fire in the belly" to get on with their training and finish the mission. My program has had a remarkable spike in enrollment in the last eighteen months; I attribute this in part to its reputation for allowing degree candidates to progress as quickly as their time and talents allow.

All graduate programs in the College of Education have a two-year course rotation that describes—theoretically, at least—which courses will be offered and when. Reality is somewhat less predictable: Summer courses are never guaranteed, and enrollment fluctuations can result in more or fewer courses being taught in the spring and fall semesters. It is always a challenge to ensure that the "right" courses are available to students in their final semester so they can graduate when they planned to.

If one of the tracks in a container course is equivalent to the content of a required course on a student's plan of study, the container course can fulfill the requirement. By counting container courses toward degree requirements, motivated students may graduate a semester earlier than would otherwise be possible—even as they benefit from the content of all required courses.

Increased Enrollment

Container courses are a way to offer more courses at the same time without having to pay the instructor for overloads. The more courses you offer each semester, the more opportunities you create for majors and non-majors to enroll in coursework they find appealing.

Avoiding Jury-Rigged Independent Study Courses of Limited Value

In the past, a student might need a course to graduate yet find it was not offered in his final semester. He had the option of taking a semester off, but this would both complicate his financial aid and require him to reapply to the program. The alternative was to substitute some type of independent study for the required course.

Independent study courses have their place, but they do not always appeal to my students. The Center for Independent Language Study Project report (2000) cites several of the same objections to independent study courses:

- Students may not see independent study as a "genuine" alternative worthy of tuition.
- They may not have the intrinsic motivation needed to structure their time so as to succeed in an independent study course.
- They may feel intimidated by the shift from the student role of completing a list of assignments to the manager role of navigating a less-well-defined personal learning exploration.
- They are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors, such as plagiarism, because they perceive independent study as a convenient gimmick to enable them to graduate on time.

Because required courses equip students with part of the necessary skill set of a profession, substituting independent study courses may result in the inadvertent graduation of young professionals who lack certain vital skills. The use of container courses can lessen the need for institutions—and students—to consider independent study options.

More Stable Course Enrollment

A student may enroll in a course that is a poor fit at the time. For example, she may be enrolled in a more difficult course when she also has to meet some unexpected family demands. Too often, the student in such a situation drops the course. But if the course were a container course, the student might be able to maintain her enrollment by switching to the other component track, which

might amount to a lighter workload. This is especially useful when a non-major takes a container course as an elective and has misunderstood either the direction or the demands of the component track he originally chose.

Variable Credit Option

You can permit variable credit to accommodate students who wish to take one or both component tracks of a container course at the same time. In my container courses, students earn either three or six graduate credits depending on whether they complete one or both component tracks.

In addition to their many benefits, this summer's container courses posed some interesting challenges:

Cohort Activities

The importance of using student-to-student interaction to build learning communities within online courses is well-established (Hiltz 1994; Poole 2000; Swan 2002). Offering more opportunities to take a course by using container courses can decrease the class size of individual sections. This may have the unfortunate effect of limiting the amount of student-to-student communication available for blogs, wikis, study groups, and other forms of social networking. Small class size may be ameliorated—or even eliminated—over time if the benefits of the container courses attract more students to the program. Also, it is arguably better to have eight actively engaged participants in a graduate-level discussion board than to have dozens competing for time and attention.

Transcript Confusion

The course name "Special Topics" doesn't provide much information to potential employers. The best solution is to work with the registrar's office to include a more descriptive subtitle on the transcript of each student who enrolls in a container course; of course, the subtitle should reflect the particular component track(s) the student completed. I also offer to write a letter of reference for every graduating student; the letter includes a paragraph explaining what he accomplished in his container course(s).

Bookkeeping Load

Unless the registrar's office is willing to help by providing transcript subtitles, the program chair must keep a record of which students took which component track(s) in container classes. This is necessary for advisement and to prevent a student from repeating identical coursework for credit. For example, if container course IDT 6385 contains component tracks equivalent to courses IDT 6310 and IDT 6320, a student is only allowed to repeat IDT 6385 for credit if she takes the "other" component track the second time. She also could take the IDT 6310 component track when registered for container course IDT 6385 and take the regular IDT 6320 course later. This student could not take the regular IDT 6310 course because she already received credit for its content in container course IDT 6385.

Product Visibility

I can't give away what I have to offer fast enough. I mail every student a DVD of my lecture/demonstrations for each of my classes. If students send copies to some of their friends and relations, so much the better. Some of those people may eventually enroll in my program. I realize that my marketing philosophy is not universal. If you are concerned about giving students the content of two courses when they are only paying for the content of one, then you still have an option: Require that each student commit to a specific component track when he registers for a container course. Then use your online course management system to deny access to the other component track.

TIPS FOR MAKING CONTAINER COURSES WORK SMOOTHLY

My container courses ran quite transparently once they were established. There really were no "moving parts" to fail. Nevertheless, here are a few things to keep in mind when implementing container courses for the first time:

- A new component track inside a container course will have just as many start-up glitches as any other new online course. It may be best to introduce new courses as regular online courses and only "containerize" them once their stability is ensured.
- As soon as possible, get approval for your container courses to be repeated for credit. It is highly likely that some students will want to take one track one semester and the other track in a subsequent semester.
- Maintain the traditional independent study option. Some students will have a legitimate desire to do serious work on an "off-the-beaten-track" topic, and they

should have the opportunity to do so. Not all independent studies lack legitimacy.

- There is such a thing as an unhealthy fixation on the goal of graduating as soon as possible. Container courses permit students to earn credits rapidly and to move quickly through their programs to degree completion. In Instructional Design & Technology, a degree will not lead to a new or better job unless it is accompanied by a portfolio that demonstrates the graduate's abundant marketable skills. Portfolio building takes time, and some students may need to be encouraged to move a little more slowly through their graduate program even if container courses provide a faster route.

SUMMARY

When job candidates were scarce and job opportunities abundant, employers could sometimes take a chance on a candidate primarily because she held an advanced degree. (At least she had demonstrated some tenacity in completing a graduate-level course of study.) Yet given today's reality of more candidates chasing fewer jobs, hiring officers are much more accountable for accurately predicting which graduates are most likely to succeed on the job. Consequently, they seek demonstrated competence, like a portfolio of meaningful work.

If we truly believe that our graduate degree programs provide the best preparation for creating that portfolio, then we should constantly be looking for ways to eliminate as many institutional impediments to a student's progress as we can while ensuring that students have the chance to acquire every advantageous skill. The lack of availability of required classes when they are needed is among the most frustrating of these impediments—particularly when such lack is the result of budget constraints. Container courses address this problem by shifting the locus of program control toward the student *without lessening academic rigor.* There is nothing to lose and much to gain by offering container courses whenever the opportunity to do so presents itself.

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