Building an Instructional Design Alumni Support Community: Tracking Alumni for Program Evaluation and Added Value

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Abstract

This paper is a report of the development of a systematic process for locating instructional design alumni and recruiting them to provide feedback from their workplaces. The purpose is to make alumni part of the process for program improvement. The process for tracking, contacting, and gathering data from alumni is described. In addition, the results from the survey are discussed.

Introduction

When a graduate program reaches a certain level of maturity, the need to systematically re-examine, re-evaluate, and reflect on the program's success in preparing our alumni becomes very important. In addition, a significant group of alumni become potential advisors for continuous program improvement.

The reasons for maintaining contact with alumni include networking for current students to obtain internships and professional positions, meeting requirements for accrediting agencies, and determining how well the program prepared the graduates for their professional careers. In order to strengthen graduates' ability to move theory into practice, graduate programs need to stay current on professional practices. To determine what current practices are and to aid in evaluation and planning, documented information should be obtained from both alumni and professional organizations.

The problem is how to maintain continuous contact with alumni and seek their advice regarding the program. Maintaining a sense of community among alumni of a graduate program is difficult. It is even more difficult if the program itself is made up of adult students who mostly work full-time, have family and other responsibilities, and perhaps do not have the time to invest in developing professional relationships while they are in the program.

At least two important issues must be addressed in contacting alumni. The first is the need to develop instruments that will facilitate large response rates (Delaney, 1994; Underwood, Nault, & Ferguson, 1994). The second is locating current contact information for alumni when a complete database has not been developed. In fact, models for developing an alumni community are needed to assist with the process of contacting alumni and gaining important feedback to be used in current programs (Davidson-Shivers, Inpornjivit, & Sellers, 2003; Delaney, 1995).

Based on the literature, our current level of data, and the needs of the program, we determined five broad questions that we needed to answer to understand the needs of our students and thereby improve our program. The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What are the career paths of Master's and Ph.D. alumni?
2. How well did the program prepare alumni for their career paths?
3. At what level would the alumni like to be involved in the program?
4. What can be done to make alumni participation/involvement easier?
5. How can we keep a current database of our alumni?

Methods

In an effort to capitalize on previous efforts, our first step was to identify extant data sources within our organization. One important data source was a 26-item Alumni survey administered in 2001 (Davidson-Shivers, et. al., 2003). The 2003 study served as a foundation for developing the instruments for the current study.

Other extant data, although collected for somewhat different purposes, were also identified. The data included the following: (1) online survey of current Instructional Design and Development (IDD) students (http://www.southalabama.edu/coe/bset/idd /surveys.html), (2) IDD student exit surveys, (3) Needs Assessment

report (Davis, Rivers, Conley, & Bowers, 2003), and (4) technical report of the perceptions of Ph.D. alumni of the program (Bates, Beck, McDonald, & Ward, 2003). Finally, the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI) (Richey, Fields, & Foxon, 2000) professional competencies informed our survey design.

In order to involve current students, we included the tracking system as a Needs Assessment (NA) project in one of our online graduate courses. The student team (Shaw & Irvin, 2004) was given the following "proble m" statement:

This NA project is related to tracking Alumni of the Instructional Design and Development (IDD) program. Currently the IDD program does not have a formal system in place for tracking the career paths of our graduates. The Chair of the department has tasked the researchers with developing a process for tracking   and contacting these alumni. Data are needed to determine where our graduates go, what competencies they need in their jobs, and whether or not they felt they were prepared by the program for these competencies.

The students, Shaw and Irvin (2004), conducted the following data collection activities: (1) sent out information to both the ITForum listserv and our internal student group listserv to identify alumni contact information and (2) contacted faculty members within the program to determine what other data sources were available and what data sources needed to be explored. The outcome of their Needs Assessment was a well-developed tracking manual that included not only the process of setting up and maintaining a database but also the specific forms. In fact, many of the questions in the survey were based on Shaw and Irvin's suggested survey questions.

Based upon the literature (Underwood, et. al., 1994), we had originally intended to develop two separate surveys for Master's and Ph.D. graduates to address the possible difference in career paths, knowledge and skill needs, and experience of each of the two populations. However, because many of the questions we had intended to ask had been answered in previous alumni surveys and because our research questions were somewhat broad, we determined that a single survey would serve our purposes. In other words, as we reviewed the extant data and began developing the survey we found that our original ideas for the survey design were not meeting the objectives of the research project. In addition, a number of graduates completed both the Master's and Ph.D. degrees in our program. Therefore, using a single survey was determined to be the best approach.

The survey (Appendix 1) was created with an online software program, Survey Monkey. The survey consisted of six sections: (1) The Letter to IDD Alumni -- the request for participation, (2) Responses to Previous Questionnaires -- a checklist to identify participation in previous surveys, (3) Information about You -- questions related to demographics and contact information, (4) Alumni Career Paths, (5) 1st Southeastern Regional Conference for IDT (http://www.usouthal.edu/coe/srcidt) -- information on an upcoming program conference and questions related to alumni interest in the conference, and (6) Anything Else -- an open-ended item for additional comments. The questionnaire included a total of 23 questions.

A list of alumni was obtained from the university Alumni office. A letter, asking the alumni to log on to the program website and complete the survey, was mailed to the 152 alumni on the list. A modified version of the same letter was posted to an international listserv (ITForum) for instructional design and technology professionals and to the program's internal listserv. All three modes of communication included a request for the alumni to respond by a certain date. Because the response rate was only 23% by the given date, a postcard reminder was sent out to those who had not responded. The reminder generated additional responses and the final response rate was 30% (46 respondents).

Results

The results of the online questionnaire are organized according to research questions. The related results of previous surveys (Bates, et. al., 2003; Davidson-Shivers, et. al., 2003) are included in some instances.

Research Question 1: What are the career paths of Master's and Ph.D. alumni?

In the 2001 alumni survey (Davidson-Shivers, et. al., 2003), 18 of the Master's alumni (78%) and 13 of the PhD alumni (81%) reported that they currently worked in a job related to ID. However, in the current study, only 16 of the 33 Master's respondents, or 48%, reported that they currently work in the field of Instructional Design and Development (IDD). Similarly, only 6 of the 13 PhD respondents, or 46%, reported that they currently work in the IDD field. The respondents who stated that they are not currently working in the IDD field provided the following information related to their current positions:

- Student in IDD Ph.D. Program

- Assistant Professor
- Managing computer labs and teaching microcomputing in education
- I am presently working as an elementary school principal, so I'm kind of in the field, but maybe not for your purposes.
- Instructor
- Naval Helicopter Standardization Flight Instructor
- Program Development Specialist
- Retail Sales of Art and Fine Crafts
- Gulfstream V Pilot for Dept of Homeland Security and US Coast Guard.
- Doctoral student
- I am the program coordinator (chair) of the Information Technology Program in the School of Computer and Information Science at [name omitted].   One of my duties is to develop new curriculum, I suppose that is related to IDD work?
- Computer Programmer Analyst and Management Systems Specialist
- Real Estate Investment.
- I work in Human Performance Technology.
- Since graduation, I have worked in the technology industry
- Program Director [name omitted] Special Courses (education)
- I'm currently an Assistant Prof. in the English Dept.; however, I am applying a lot of stuff (stats and research design) from IDD to my research in composition studies.
- Administrative Support Specialist - Training Department
- Mother
- Financial Manager

The alumni who responded that they are currently working in the IDD field supplied the following information about the title of their current position:

- Senior Instructional Systems Specialist
- Senior Instructional Designer
- Instructional Designer - Coop Student
- Instructional Design Specialist
- Instructor
- Assistant Professor
- Associate Professor
- Department Chair
- Senior HR Manager/Curriculum Design
- Instructional Designer and Online Course Developer
- Multimedia Producer
- Teacher
- Technology Facilitator
- Solution Planner
- Training Coordinator

- Owner

In response to the question "In what field do you currently work" the number of respondents by field are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Field by number of respondents and overall percentage (n=46)*

Field	Number	Percentage
Higher Education Faculty	13	28.3%
Business/Industry	10	21.7%
Other	6	13%
K-12 Faculty	4	8.7%
Higher Education Administration	4	8.7%
Military	3	6.5%
K-12 Administration	2	4.3%
Government	2	4.3%
No Answer	2	4.3%
Health Care	0	0

Research Question 2: How well did the program prepare alumni for their career paths?

Thirty-nine alumni (27 Master's and 12 Ph.D.) described success stories connected to their graduate education. The predominant themes centered on the following areas:

- application of theories
- implementation of technology interventions in educational, military, health care, and corporate settings
- design of courses in a variety of settings (e.g., higher education, adult continuing education, K-12 education, military training, and corporate training)
- development of distance education programs in a variety of settings (e.g., higher education, adult continuing education, K-12 education, military training, and corporate training)
- management of teams and large projects
- human performance technology expertise
- needs assessment expertise
- evaluation expertise
- recognition of expertise
- recognition for excellent work

The responses indicate the graduates do feel successful and are eager to attribute their success to their graduate education. The following quotes illustrate the success of the alumni.

I rely on what I learned in the Ph.D. program every day as an assistant professor. I'm aware of and apply my ID skills when I design course materials and then deliver instruction. I have an extensive web-based support program for all of my classes, and it was designed based on my Ph.D. student experience.

As a result of the combination of practical experience in a plant environment and information gained from IDD I was able to enter a variety of corporate environments and contribute immediately. In a short period of time I was considered an expert in [company name omitted] Production Planning and Materials Management modules.

Provide leadership, budgeting, scheduling, curriculum oversight and teacher evaluations related to Science classes (6-12).

Just having the MS degree has done a lot. I get a lot of calls for work because of my experience and the degree.

I have slowly but surely convinced many non-profit organizations of the value of program evaluation and improvement.

My IDD background and dissertation research have made me an evaluation 'expert' in the eyes of the different commands for which I have worked. All of the USA graduates enjoy a very good reputation within the Navy.

Other indicators regarding alumni success and a positive graduate study experience were found in the open-ended questions asking for "Anything Else?" The positive opinions are shown in the following statements:

I think USA's IDD program is very strong. The professors stay current in IDD knowledge and practice!

My IDD experience was very positive: Great instructors, great courses, great lab! Thank you all very much!

The IDD program at USA is second to none! The curriculum is effective and the professors are outstanding. I enjoyed every course and learned so much during my time in the program.

This degree is wonderfully versatile. I have been able to use my degree to stay employed in this hard economy. Students might have an interest in knowing how this degree can be tailored to different fields and applications.

Additional positive comments were found among the 22 (17 Master's, 5 Ph.D.) alumni who responded to the question regarding "challenge" stories. For example, one doctoral graduate offered the following statement that exemplifies responses from nine alumni:

No challenge stories related to a possible lack of education from the IDD program. I feel very well prepared.

Some challenges that were described were related to specific issues in the work environment. For example, references were made to getting stakeholders to identify what they really want and getting businesses to allow enough time for adequate needs assessment for training programs. Other challenges were related to keeping pace with changing trends in technology. For example, a Master's graduate stated the following:

Because my work is centered on developing computer based distance training, it would have been beneficial to include additional technology classes and a study of various delivery methods for distance education.

The Survey of IDD Alumni for Academic Year 2001 (Davidson, et. al., 2003) showed that alumni feel satisfied with their work and believe the degree helped them obtain their current job. Among the Master's alumni, 17 of 23 graduates indicated the degree helped them obtain their current job. Responses for the Ph.D. alumni showed that 11 of 17 graduates held the same belief.

Research Question 3: At what level would the alumni like to be involved in the program?

Part of the online questionnaire included a section regarding an upcoming program conference (http://www.usouthal.edu/coe/srcidt). The alumni were asked to suggest keynote speakers and possible topics for the conference. Alumni were also asked to indicate their interest in working on volunteer committees involved in the planning and organizing of the conference. A total of 17 (12 Master's, 5 Ph.D.) alumni volunteered to work on conference committees.

Research Question 4: What can be done to make alumni participation/involvement easier?

The majority of alumni (83%) indicated the best way to contact them is through e-mail. When asked about preferred information sources for alumni, 61% indicated a preference for a web newsletter. Additional suggestions for information were offered by the alumni:

- *IDD Resources (papers, how-to, etc.)*
- *Educational offerings such as continuing education, workshops, jobs.*
- *I would like to see the newsletter include a job opportunity resource listing and conference information. It may also be interesting to know which conferences the IDD (&/or BSET) dept is attending.*

Research Question 5: How can we keep a current database of our alumni?

In a needs assessment for tracking IDD students, Shaw and Irvin (2004) developed a "Tracking Manual" that outlined a systematic process for creating and maintaining a database for tracking alumni. One of the requirements in the manual was a dedicated database administrator.

An incentive for generating a current database of alumni was offered by one of the alumni respondents in the open-ended question asking for "Anything Else?" The graduate stated a desire for a database along with praise for the program and the faculty in this response:

I would love a database of alums, and to be able to access a website where alums could interface and share experiences/ideas, and maybe recruit some talent! Again, the program gave me everything I needed to launch a successful consulting practice! I thank my instructors and professors for pushing us and bringing us the latest in ISD practices!

Discussion

Based upon our preliminary evaluation of the data, we believe that the continuing process of systematically collecting the data will increase alumni involvement in both the evaluation and future development of the program. The data from the surveys will be used for the following purposes: (1) determine the best tracking system, (2) determine the programs that will help build a better alumni community, (3) determine the best way to coordinate our alumni efforts within the university, and (4) determine what our program is doing right and what we could do better.

An important consideration in maintaining contact with alumni was pointed out in two previous reports (Davidson et. al., 2003; Shaw & Irvin, 2004). Administrative support and the allocation of human resources (e.g., graduate assistants or current student association officers) are imperative to the process of gathering and recording reliable alumni information.

In terms of the best way to continue a relationship with alumni, the findings regarding modes of contact are important. The majority of alumni (83%) indicated the best way to contact them is through e-mail. The challenge then is to maintain current e-mail addresses. A potential way to do that is by requesting a permanent e-mail address that resides on the university's server for all alumni – especially now that all current students at our university are provided an e-mail address for use in official university communications. In addition, a web newsletter and the potential opportunity to participate in a database for networking with other alumni may encourage graduates to submit current information about their experiences after graduation. The alumni interest in volunteering to work on committees for the upcoming conference indicates a genuine interest in affiliating with the program.

The fact that at a recent program retreat one of the discussion threads was the creation and maintenance of an alumni database reinforces our belief in the need to institute an official IDD program database. From that discussion several key benefits of having a well-designed and updated alumni database were discussed. For example, past data have not been linked to demographics, which does not allow for a comparison of responses by respondent characteristics. In addition, the data need to be maintained systematically over time so that the program faculty can use it for longitudinal questions such as "Where are our current graduates going after graduation?" and "What are the competencies that our graduates are expected to have upon graduation?" Without a comparison over time, we have no empirical basis for program adjustments and improvements.

Our findings show that the graduates of our program work in a variety of disciplines. One interesting finding related to alumni career paths was the number of graduates who stated they are not currently working in IDD. Yet, many of their job descriptions and titles lend themselves to applications of IDD (e.g., Assistant Professor, Program Director, Human Performance Technology, and others). The next question then is to determine if we should ask the occupation question differently or if something is inherent in the way alumni define the program from which they graduated.

While the results of the survey are context-specific, many programs in higher education are facing the same pressure to evaluate their practices (Davidson-Shivers, et. al., 2003). The process and the results could serve as a

model for other ID graduate programs in their efforts to build community and evaluate their program effectiveness. The interest could be from a program evaluation viewpoint, an accreditation need, or strictly based on funding needs. Alumni tracking and the subsequent development of a strong community between alumni and the program will help connect academic theory and practice to successful contributions in society.

References

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Appendix 1: Online Questionnaire

Letter to IDD Alumni

September 10, 2004

The Instructional Design and Development program at the University of South Alabama is now in its 13th year and the time has come to reexamine the program. To better understand what changes are needed for today's graduates, as well as build a stronger relationship with past graduates, we have developed an online questionnaire to gather information about the career path you followed as a result of your graduation from the Instructional Design and Development Program. The information will be used to evaluate the current IDD Ph.D. and Master's degree programs and to determine what services our alumni need. All data will be reported in an aggregated form, therefore your individual information will remain confidential.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this survey, please contact Ms. Pam Horner with the Institutional Review Board at the University of South Alabama (telephone 251-460-6308). If you have questions about this questionnaire, please contact us at the e-mail addresses or telephone number shown below.

If you prefer to send your answers by mail or fax, please contact one of us and we will send a printed copy.

We expect the questionnaire to take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Please reply by September 30th.

Thank you very much for your assistance!

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Responses to Previous Questionnaires

1. Over the past few years faculty and graduate students have collected information from current students and alumni. We are trying to build a database that takes all of these responses into account. In order to do that we need to know if you responded to previous questionnaires sent to IDD alumni. Please check all that apply.
(2001) Questionnaire from Dr. Gayle Davidson-Shivers
(2003) Questionnaire from students of Dr. George Uhlig (Bates, Beck, McDonald, & Ward)
(2004) Questionnaire from students of Dr. Kathy Ingram (Irvin & Shaw)

Information About You

 2. Please complete the following contact information fields to help us maintain current information.
First Name
Middle Initial

Last Name
Suffix (Sr., Jr., etc.)
Maiden Name
Home Address Line 1
Home Address Line 2
City
State
Zip
Business Address Line 1
Business Address Line 2
City
State
Zip
e-Mail Address
Home Telephone Number (please include area code)
Business Telephone Number (please include area code)

3. What is the best way to contact you?
Surface Mail
e-Mail
Telephone
Other (please specify)

4. What information sources would you most like the IDD program to make available to you? Please check all that apply.
Bi-Annual Newsletter
Web Newsletter
Alumni Web Site
Other (please specify)

5. Sex
Male
Female

6. Ethnicity
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African-American
Hispanic or Latino
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
White
Other (please specify)

7. Date of Graduation from IDD Master's Program (USA only)

8. Date of Graduation from IDD Ph.D. Program (USA only)

9. Please list any other degrees you received – including degree name, major field of study, institution/school name, and year --e.g.,B.A. English Florida State University 2001
Degree 1
Major
School
Year
Degree 2
Major
School

Year
Degree 3
Major
School
Year
Degree 4
Major
School
Year

Alumni Career Paths

The following questions are related to your work.

10. Are you currently working in the field of Instructional Design and Development?
Yes
No

11. If you are *not* currently working in the field of Instructional Design and Development, please indicate your current profession.

12. In what field do you currently work?
K-12 Faculty
K-12 Administration
Higher Education Faculty
Higher Education Administration
Business/Industry
Health Care
Military
Government
Other (please specify)

13. Where do work currently?
Organization Name
City
State

14. What is your job title?

15. How long have you been employed in your current job?

16. Briefly describe any other jobs you have had since your graduation from the IDD Program. Please include the *company name*, your *job title*, and a brief *description of your duties*.

17. Please tell us about any *success* stories you have that link your work and your education from the IDD Program.

18. Please tell us about any *challenge* stories you have that link your work and a possible *lack of* education from the IDD Program.

1st Southeastern Conference in IDT

The 1st Southeastern Conference in Instructional Design and Technology (IDT) will be hosted by the University of South Alabama Instructional Design and Development Program on March 11 – 13, 2005. The conference theme is *Challenges of e-Learning and IDT*. The conference was first conceived as one way to reconnect with our alumni.

We would like your input into the conference planning. Please answer the following questions regarding the regional conference to be held on March 11 – 13, 2005.

19. Who do you suggest as keynote s peakers for the conference?

20. What topics do you suggest for the conference?
Topic 1
Topic 2
Topic 3
Topic 4
Topic 5

21. Please indicate your interest in serving on conference planning committees. Please check all that apply.
Scheduling Committee
Hotel and Travel Committee
Program Design Committee
Program Announcement and RFP Committee
Proposal Review Committee
Proceedings Committee
Program Printing Committee
Meals, Receptions, and Recreation Committee
Conference Treasurer
Registration Committee
Materials and Supplies Committee
Equipment Committee
Conference Web Site Committee
Exhibits Committee
Sponsorship Committee
Decorations and Signs Committee
Hospitality Committee
Conference Evaluation Committee

22. Do you think you will be able to attend the conference in March 2005?
Yes, definitely
No, definitely not
Maybe

Anything Else?

23. Please use the space below to tell us anything else you would like us to know.

Thank You!

Be sure to click the *Done* button when you are finished.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!