

Student Satisfaction and Graduate Part-Time Students

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INTRODUCTION

The Advanced Academic Programs (AAP) of the Zanvyl Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) enrolls approximately 2,700 part-time graduate students across three physical locations (the Homewood campus in Baltimore, MD; the Rockville campus in Montgomery County, MD; and the Washington, DC, Center). It is a complex organization whose target audience is a sophisticated consumer of higher education. With the support of Eduventures, AAP designed and administered a web-based survey to get data about the experience of its students.

The impetus for the student experience survey was threefold: First, rather than rely on anecdotes or impressions, AAP needed reliable data coming directly from students that could be systematically gathered and analyzed.

Second, AAP experienced record enrollment in 2009. To ensure that the growth frequently associated with an enrollment bubble would not diminish the quality of the student experience and that AAP was meeting the needs of its students, AAP wanted to be able to use its resources to target the most relevant areas for improvement based on student feedback.

Third, the student survey could validate AAP's assumptions about the quality of the Hopkins experience, specifically promises made to students during the "courtship" and recruitment process. As Gilmore and Pine (2002) contended in *Welcome to the Experience Economy*, "the best way to market

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any offering (good, service or experience) is with an experience so engaging that potential customers can't help but pay attention." If the experience is the marketing, AAP could improve its marketing potential by providing and ensuring a quality student experience.

SURVEY DESIGN

The Executive Director for Academic Services initiated the idea of a student experience survey. It was shared as a working idea at a team meeting in June 2009 where managers representing the various functional units (IT, marketing, finance, enrollment services, etc) were present, and subsequently the Director of Student and Faculty Services was charged with leading a working committee through the process of designing a survey instrument. The committee was comprised of the following staff: Executive Director, Academic Services; Director, Student and Faculty Services; Marketing Manager; Registration Manager; two MA in Communication faculty members (both of whom taught research methods and writing); and the head librarian at the Washington, DC Center of AAP.

At the first meeting, the working committee made the following decisions:

- It was agreed that the goal of the survey would be to determine how satisfied AAP students were with their experience thus far and with the services that AAP provided. The survey also would show if there were any unmet needs and how AAP might improve its service delivery.
- The target audience would be all active students (those who were currently taking or had taken a course in the past year). Those who were still making progress toward a degree but had not registered in the past year would not be included in the survey. Students would be invited to take the survey in their first semester.
- The group decided on six general categories:
 1. Demographics (age, gender, race, income range, primary site (Baltimore, Rockville, DC, and online), program start date, number of courses completed, international, military, work experience.
 2. Facilities and infrastructure (ease of getting around, campus locations, classrooms, computer labs, parking, student lounge, food availability security, etc.).

3. Administrative support—orientation, registration/ Add-Drop, financial aid, bookstore, general customer service, service for international students, students with disabilities, veterans, online.
4. Professional and academic support—library services, career services, academic advising, accessibility of faculty; Johns Hopkins Student Assistance Program/ Counseling
5. IT support and web use.
6. Campus climate (diversity, sense of community, social networking).

The working committee created and continually modified the survey throughout the fall 2009 semester. Along the way, it shared drafts of the survey with senior leadership in the organization and academic-program directors. The survey was also sent to the Hopkins Internal Review Board, a necessary step in conducting research at Johns Hopkins with live subjects.

In January 2010, AAP reached out to Eduventures, a research and consulting firm specializing in higher education, to finalize and administer the survey. Once the survey design was completed, select AAP and Eduventures' staff took the survey and concluded that it would take the average student 15-20 minutes to complete.

In March 2010 the Senior Associate Dean of AAP sent an emailed invitation to graduate students to participate online in the Student Experience Survey. The email blast included a URL link directing students to an Eduventures' site for the survey. The survey was sent to approximately 2,400 students with valid email addresses on file.

RESULTS

Eduventures was able to provide regular updates on the student response rate and early findings. After the first 24 hours, 192 respondents completed the survey (8 percent of 2,400). The survey remained open from March 9, 2010 until March 31, 2010. By the conclusion of the survey period, 806 students responded (34 percent).

The following excerpts come directly from the Eduventures' executive summary:

- A vast majority of students were pleased with their decision to attend Johns Hopkins.

- Most students would choose to attend their AAP program if they could make their graduate school enrollment decision again.
- Most students said their academic program was intellectually challenging and prepared them to excel professionally.
- Students were pleased with the flexibility in course offerings (such as courses offered evenings, Saturdays, or online).
- Overall, students were very positive about faculty. Most respondents agreed faculty were supportive of their academic goals, had the appropriate qualifications and expertise, delivered high-quality instruction, and were accessible outside of the classroom.
- Students also reported positive experiences with AAP staff and indicated they were satisfied with administrative services at AAP.
- Many students considered Johns Hopkins' reputation its greatest strength.
- Most on-campus students at all three campuses said classrooms were comfortable, facilities were clean, and that they felt safe on the campus where they typically attended class.

The survey also revealed the following information about AAP students:

- Students were more likely to contact faculty and staff by email or phone with a question or to request help than meeting with them in-person, online, or over the phone.
- Most students accessed library resources and got assistance from librarians remotely rather than in person.
- The majority of students never used the computer labs on campus.

Suggestions for how to improve the student experience included:

- Build a stronger sense of community and a sense of affinity to the university among students.
 - o Develop an on-campus new-student orientation program. An orientation that brought students together in person could establish a sense of community and of affinity to the university early in their enrollment.
 - o Create a student newsletter and a listserv and encourage students to access them. These media would give all

students a sense of connection with the university, including online students who went to campus less frequently. A majority of respondents to the survey said they would make use of a student newsletter and listserv.

- o Encourage AAP-specific, academic program-oriented student organizations. Nearly 50 percent of students said they would make use of student organizations. These organizations could connect students and increase the sense of community.
- Facilitate more networking opportunities for AAP students. AAP students said they would make use of networking events sponsored by their program. Specific suggestions for networking opportunities included departmentally sponsored happy hours, using social-networking tools, and networking events that included professionals who worked in fields relevant to students in AAP programs.
- Give AAP students greater access to career services. Respondents said they would use career services. Individual career counseling and guidance in preparing resumes were specific services respondents said they would use most frequently.
- Extend hours for campus facilities. This could be particularly pertinent to students who took evening or weekend courses and students at the Washington, DC Center. This could also ensure adequate space for AAP students to congregate and study on campus.

ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

In summer 2010 the position of director of student enrollment services was converted to that of data analyst, and a year later AAP hired a part-time data analyst to handle special data projects. To ensure that the momentum gained from the 2010 student experience was not lost, the data analyst was asked to revisit the findings of the survey to extract more granular details from the quantitative and qualitative data.

The analyst divided the first two sections of the survey (student climate and academic experience) into five broader categories:

- Satisfaction with Faculty:
 - o Faculty members in my program are supportive of my academic goals.

- o I feel respected by the faculty in my graduate program.
- o Faculty members have appropriate qualifications and expertise.
- o Faculty members deliver high-quality instruction.
- o Faculty members are accessible to me outside of the classroom.
- Satisfaction with Program:
 - o There is a strong sense of community within my graduate program.
 - o Students in my program are supportive of my academic goals.
 - o My graduate program creates opportunities for students to network.
 - o I feel respected by the classmates in my graduate program.
 - o Cultural diversity is respected in my program.
 - o I am confident that my program will prepare me to excel professionally.
 - o My program attracts top-quality students.
 - o I have a clear understanding of my program's policies and degree requirements.
- Satisfaction with Advisor:
 - o My advisor is accessible when I have questions.
 - o My advisor is knowledgeable and able to help with my questions and concerns.
- Satisfaction with Courses:
 - o The number of students in my classes is conducive to learning.
 - o My program offers and adequate number of on-campus courses each semester.
 - o My program offers and adequate number of online courses each semester.
- Satisfaction with AAP/JHU:
 - o I feel a sense of affinity (connection, loyalty) to Johns Hopkins University.
 - o I am pleased with my decision to attend Johns Hopkins University.

- o If I were making my graduate school enrollment decision today, I would again choose to attend my current AAP program.
- o My graduate experience at JHU is intellectually challenging.

The findings suggested little variation between dimensions; satisfaction with faculty and satisfaction with AAP/JHU scored the highest. When these same dimensions were considered across geographic locations (Baltimore, Rockville, DC, and online), online students scored the highest mean on all dimensions with the highest score for satisfaction with AAP/JHU. While AAP students were mostly satisfied with their student experience at JHU, there remained room for improvement in the experience of “on-ground” students compared with their online counterparts.

INSTITUTIONAL REACTIONS AND RESPONSES

Going into the survey, AAP staff had no idea what the response would be to the survey, and there were a number of surprises, beginning with the high response rate. The committee that created the survey was concerned about its length, but the initial 10 percent return within the first 24 hours and the overall rate of 34 percent showed how much students wanted to give feedback to the program.

It was also a revelation that our students felt that a more comprehensive orientation was important in establishing a sense of community. AAP had a sense that students wanted to be part of a community, but the survey showed that students saw orientation as a critical factor not only in learning more about a program but also building a foundation for community. The strong desire for community extended to students’ interest in networking and socializing. We believed that graduate part-time students were too busy to want social activities or did not look to the school as a site for a social network, but the survey results showed that we were mistaken.

Finally, key staff members were not sure about the reaction from online students. AAP had recently migrated from the WebCT course-management system to Sakai. Some staff anticipated that online students would use the survey to vent and point out the flaws in the transition between systems. No one expected online students to be the “most satisfied” of all the student populations.

The results of the survey were shared with program directors (faculty) and key administrative staff. AAP also shared a summary of the findings

with all students that included a statement on the current findings (strengths and areas of improvement) and what immediate steps the organization was prepared to take to improve their experience, including:

- Increasing the number of new-student orientations and their delivery methods, including an orientation specifically for international students.
- Building community through more program and networking events (alumni and student networking grants of up to \$500 were offered to academic programs as an incentive), creating an AAP Linked-In group and Facebook pages for AAP and individual programs.
- Hiring a career services manager and setting up a career center.
- Planning for more space for student study groups at the DC location, enhancing existing spaces, and extending hours of service.
- Redesigning the AAP website to improve navigability and access to information and making more of its resources available online.
- Highlighting parking alternatives in DC.

AAP also organized a data summit (partial day event focused on key performance indicators) in spring 2011 in which highlights of the student experience survey were again shared, and incorporated excerpts from the survey into its annual fund solicitation letter to alumni.

CONCLUSION

The survey was worthwhile for both AAP and its students. Students were given an opportunity to share their feelings and to participate in improving the quality of their experience at AAP; AAP, in turn, was able to respond to the needs of its students in the most effective way. AAP is committed to sustaining the momentum generated by the survey; it will be refined and administered every two years using the same methodology. The next administration will be in spring 2012.

For graduate programs that seek to understand the depth of perceptions held by their students, the value of a student satisfaction survey cannot be emphasized enough. Institutions, however, must be prepared to take action on information discovered during the process and will need to make decisions about what is or is not feasible to address or modify. 🌐