



Alumni Data and Research for Academic Program Evaluation and Academic Policy

Project Overview

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This project is conducted as a partnership between Academic Planning and Analysis (APA, a unit of the Office of the Provost) and the Wisconsin Alumni Association (WAA). Further collaboration with contacts in schools and colleges across UW-Madison will be essential for the success of the project.

Goals

- Expand the collection of information on UW-Madison alumni to include more elements of interest for program evaluation and academic program development.
- Store the information in a data base structure that makes is accessible for analysis and aggregate reporting.
- Make use of the enriched alumni data sources to develop regular reports and analytic resources of use to program faculty and staff and school/college and institutional decision makers to support academic program evaluation and development.

- Make use of the enriched alumni data sources to develop regular reports and analytic resources of use to students, prospective students and their families to provide them with information on the post-graduation experiences of UW-Madison students.
- Make use of the enriched alumni data sources to develop regular reports and analytic resources to describe the value of a UW-Madison degree to the people of Wisconsin, state and federal legislators, news media, accreditors, and other external audiences.
- Make use of the enriched alumni data sources to conduct research and analysis related to a range of academic issues and initiatives.

Motivation and Rationale

Alumni records are an under-developed information source for research and program improvement at UW-Madison. The application of research on alumni as a way to enrich participation in alumni events, service to alumni, and giving has a long history. The application of such research to the evaluation and development of academic programs and academic policy is less well realized.

External constituencies – prospective students and their families, state and federal legislators, the taxpayers of Wisconsin, accrediting agencies – have expectations that we have a depth and breadth of understanding of the experiences of our alumni. Many accrediting agencies (for example, ABET, AACSB, Higher Learning Commission of NCA) have expectations that we know what are our students do after they graduate and how that reflects on the quality of their educational experience.

Many individual programs and some schools/colleges can meet the needs of their unit for this kind of information through surveys and local data sets. Program-level collection of information on what graduates do and their perceptions of their learning experience are sufficient for some purposes.

The structure and content of the information collected by the WAA and the UW Foundation (described in more detail below) provides a rich program- and institution-level source for certain data elements, especially in combination with the student records of our alumni that are maintained by the Registrar's Office.

A much more robust source of information to serve programs and institutional needs can be imagined. The goals of this project are to enrich and systematize our collections of information on alumni to make that information a richer source for a range of programmatic needs and institutional goals.

Phase I – Feasibility Testing (Spring 2004 to Summer 2005)

In phase I, we evaluated the content and structure of the alumni record data held by the WAA and the usefulness for analytical purposes.

We developed an understanding of the structure, value, and limits of the data sets, and the degree to which the alumni data can be combined with the student record data. We have produced a prototype “Alumni Profile” for all academic majors at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral level as a proof-of-concept that useful reports could be devised from this data set.

We also used that data to examine a specific policy issue known as “brain drain”. The percent of the Wisconsin population that hold bachelor’s degrees is lower than the national average although our per capita degree production is higher than average. This could be attributable to a higher than average out-migration or a lower than average in-migration of bachelors degree recipients. Out-migration is usually the assumed problem, although research based on census data shows that Wisconsin has less in-migration of bachelor’s degree holders than average. The address information in the alumni data base allowed us to ask this question directly for UW-Madison graduates and to examine the geographic distribution of UW-Madison alumni.

The WAA and the UW Foundation are custodians for the alumni records. This resource includes address information (~95% complete records due to efforts of the UW Foundation), engagement information (WAA membership records and records of having made a financial donation to the UW Foundation, 100% complete), and employer information (~20% complete). It can be combined with the degree and demographic information held by the Registrar’s Office to answer analytical and assessment questions. For the Alumni Profile prototype, we have included gender and race/ethnicity. The source of these data elements is the historical student record data. By combining these and other student-side information with the alumni data these elements the Alumni Profile becomes a richer information source.

Key findings from Phase I illustrate that:

- The alumni record data sets can be combined effectively with historical student data sets
- The alumni record data sets contain nearly complete address information.
- The alumni record data sets are a source for understanding continuing engagement of graduates in alumni activities.
- There is limited employment information in the alumni records and the information that is available is collected through a free-form entry that makes it of limited use for analytical and assessment purposes.
- Although, overall, the alumni data is organized for operational rather than analytical purposes potential exists for redesign to improve the structure of the employment information and to expand the range of information collected from alumni that may be of use in academic settings.

The slides from and April 2005 presentation describing our progress to that point, the full set of Alumni Profiles, and more detail on the geographic distribution of alumni is posted on line at: <http://wiscinfo.doit.wisc.edu/obpa/Alumni/alumni.htm>

Phase II – Expanding the Collection of Alumni Information for Reporting, Research, and Program Evaluation (Fall 2005 --)

We are planning enhancements to the existing data set in two major categories. These enhancements will be the focus of the 2005-06 academic year.

First, we envision improvements in the employment information that make analysis and reporting on employment patterns possible. This enhancement will require a multi-pronged approach. It will require a focused effort with the schools, colleges and departments to encourage them to populate the WAA data base with the information they have collected. Some programs have almost 100% employer information in their department-based systems. However, there is almost none of this information in the WAA data set. We need to develop an understanding of the barriers and

establish conditions that will motivate faculty and staff to make the transition. It will also require some re-programming by WAA on the collection site. For example, the position and occupation information is now collected in free-form entry or from a very long pick list. Additional work is needed to develop occupation selections that are easy to use for alumni, are of utility for assessment and analysis, and conform to standard occupation categories in use by state or federal agencies.

Secondly, we envision a collection system which includes a short set of survey questions (less than 10) that are of broad and common interest. Our vision for the WAA alumni information collection site was affirmed by the interest expressed by the deans at an April 2005 deans' council meeting. The deans expressed interest in a broadly available campus-wide web-based alumni survey. The assessment council has expressed interest in developing a common set of questions that could be used in many ways. One of those uses would be to include them at the WAA information collection site. A tiered survey that would allow additional program specific questions to be added is an anticipated enhancement for future development.

As these enhancements are developed, the Alumni Profile will be reprogrammed and redesigned to make use of this information and to make it available to program faculty and staff across campus. APA and WAA staff will make use of the enriched data sets in research and analysis.

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