Restructuring graduate programs to meet students' changing needs

Christina Longo
Rowan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd

Part of the Public Relations and Advertising Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you - share your thoughts on our feedback form.

Recommended Citation
Longo, Christina, "Restructuring graduate programs to meet students' changing needs" (2007). Theses and Dissertations. 829.
https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/829

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works. For more information, please contact LibraryTheses@rowan.edu.
RESTRUCTURING GRADUATE PROGRAMS TO MEET STUDENTS' CHANGING NEEDS

by

Christina Longo

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree of The Graduate School at Rowan University May 1, 2007

Approved by Advisor

Date Approved 8/18/10

© 2007 Christina Longo
ABSTRACT

Christina Longo
Restructuring Graduate Programs to Meet Students’ Changing Needs
2006/07
Advisor: Dr. Joseph Basso
Public Relations Graduate Program

This study explores the current trends in graduate education relating to adult learning theories, cognitive theories, online education and structures of graduate programs. The study also examines the future direction of graduate education.

The focus of the research involved identifying alumni perceptions of the PR graduate program at Rowan University. A survey was sent to 100 alumni. With a response rate of 47 percent, the data provided by the survey respondents was processed through SPSS to obtain percentages and calculations. The survey findings are presented in both narrative and chart form.

The results of this study show that the majority of the alumni participants were content with most aspects of Rowan’s PR graduate program. The majority of the respondents conveyed a positive view toward the effectiveness of the program as well as the extent to which the program prepared them for the workforce. The results implicated possible change in the area of the module system as well as the possibility of offering online and weekend courses.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated to:
my beautiful mother
for all her support and encouragement.

Special thanks to:

Dr. Joseph Basso, PR Graduate Coordinator, for his assistance and advisement throughout the thesis project.

Dr. Jay Kuder, Graduate School Dean, for his assistance with obtaining the graduate program data and statistics.

Dr. Corinne Blake (History Department), Dr. Kathy Ganske (Reading Department) and Dr. Robin McBee (Elementary Education Department), for their inspiration and encouragement during my undergraduate studies.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background Information</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Education – United States</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Education – New Jersey</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Graduate Program – Rowan University</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student Needs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing Graduate Programs</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Review of Literature</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognition</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Learning</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Adult Learning</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Learners &amp; Making the Decision to Enroll in Higher Ed.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Needs of Adult Learners
Trends in Education
Online Learning
Maintaining an Effective Graduate Program
Recruiting and Retaining Students
Graduate Public Relations Curriculum

III. Research Design
Type of Data Needed
Cognitive
Attitudinal
Behavioral
Source of the Data
Means of Acquiring Data
Analysis

IV. Results of Research
Survey Section One
Survey Section Two
Survey Section Three
Survey Section Four
Survey Section Five
Summary of Results

V. Interpretations and Suggestions
References
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1  Graduate Degrees Conferred: PR Graduate Program, Rowan University</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2  Application, Admission &amp; Enrollment Rates: PR Graduate Program, Rowan University</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3  U.S. Graduate Enrollment Statistics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4  Graduate Communication Programs offered in New Jersey</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5  PR Graduate Program Requirements – Rowan University</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6  Survey Question One</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7  Survey Question Two</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8  Survey Question Three</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9  Survey Question Four</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10  Survey Question Five</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11  Survey Question Six</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12  Survey Question Seven</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13  Survey Question Eight</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14  Survey Question Nine</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15  Survey Question Ten</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 16  Survey Question Eleven</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 17  Survey Question Twelve</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 18  Survey Question Thirteen</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 19  Survey Question Fourteen</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 20  Survey Question Fifteen  

Figure 21  Question Sixteen - Elimination of Comprehensive Exam, One-Half Credit Modules & Internship  

Figure 22  Question Sixteen - Schedule Adjustments: Offering Online Courses, Core Courses in Summer & Weekend Courses  

Figure 23  Question Sixteen - Program Options: Optional Thesis, Additional Writing Requirement & Full-Scale PR Plan  

Figure 24  Survey Question Seventeen  

Figure 25  Survey Question Eighteen  

Figure 26  Survey Question Nineteen  

Figure 27  Survey Question Twenty  

Figure 28  Survey Question Twenty-One  

Figure 29  Survey Question Twenty-Two  

Figure 30  Survey Question Twenty-Four  

Figure 31  Survey Question Twenty-Five  

Figure 32  Survey Question Twenty-Six  

Figure 33  Survey Question Twenty-Seven  

Figure 34  Survey Question Twenty-Eight  

Figure 35  Survey Question Twenty-Nine
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In our fast-paced, technology-driven society, graduate schools face the challenge of trying to meet students’ changing needs. Writing in *New Directions for Student Services*, Polson (2003), claimed that “the graduate student population has changed much more than the programs that serve it” (p. 59). Although some students enroll in graduate school upon the immediate completion of undergraduate studies, many graduate students hold full-time jobs and have family responsibilities. As a result, graduate schools must offer programs that accommodate students who commute, have time restraints and have work and family obligations. The author of this thesis explored how to redesign a successful graduate program to meet students’ changing needs.

Statement of the Problem

The public relations graduate program at Rowan University experienced a fluctuation in application, admission, enrollment and graduation rates over the past fifteen years. In order to uncover the reason for these unsteady rates, the author explored what level of satisfaction graduate alumni have toward the quality of their education and the level of satisfaction with the way that the program was delivered. The study focused on their attitudes regarding several aspects of the program such as program flexibility and convenience, internship and thesis requirements, quality of instruction and scheduling. The research results helped determine whether the alumni believe the program adequately prepared them for success in the workplace. The study identified alumni opinions
regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the program as well as their recommendations concerning how the program should be modified. The results of this research provided insights into how the program could be restructured to meet students’ needs.

Figure 1 shows the number of degrees awarded in the PR graduate program during the past fifteen years. The statistics were published in the Rowan University Resource Book Archives by the Institutional Research and Planning Department.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Degrees Conferred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1 shows that a consistent rate of increase or decline does not exist. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Figure 2 below. The following chart shows the application, admission and enrollment rates over the past few years. The chart shows a decline in application and admission rates; however, the enrollment rates continue to fluctuate.

**Figure 2**  
Application, Admission & Enrollment Rates:  
PR Graduate Program, Rowan University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Applied</th>
<th>Admitted</th>
<th>Enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Background Information**

*Graduate Education – United States*

In contrast to the unsteady enrollment rates in the PR graduate program at Rowan, the country as a whole has experienced increased rates in graduate enrollment over the past fifteen years. *The Digest of Education Statistics 2005* revealed that graduate fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions experienced an increase of approximately 29 percent from 1992 to 2004. Figure 3 shows the rise in graduate fall enrollment since 1992 (Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2006, p. 307).
In New Jersey in 2004, the total fall graduate enrollment was 52,696 (p. 325). Of the 50 states, New Jersey ranked 14 in having the highest fall graduate enrollment.

**Graduate Education – New Jersey**

New Jersey has 30 higher educational institutions that fall under the categories of either public research universities, state colleges and universities, independent four-year colleges and proprietary institutions with degree-granting authority (New Jersey Commission on Higher Education, 2006). A search on the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education website showed that seven of these institutions offer a master of arts
Among these programs is Rowan University’s graduate program in public relations. The university is ranked at number 29 on USNews.com’s 2007 top northern Universities list (U.S. News & World Report, 2006).

**PR Graduate Program – Rowan University**

The PR graduate program at Rowan University offers students the choice of pursuing either a corporate or educational track. Students have the option of attending full-time or part-time and completing the program within one to six years. The thirty-three credit program leads to a master’s of arts in public relations.

The core courses of the program require study in the areas of research methodology, writing news releases, communicating with the media and preparing PR plans. The core coursework also includes a thesis requirement, and all students are
required to complete at least a three-credit internship experience. The core component of the program totals 21 to 24 credits.

For the remainder of the program, students select nine to 12 credits of elective courses. The electives cover a variety of areas including public relations, mass media, public opinion and electronic media. These elective courses are mostly offered in the form of modules. The modules range from one-half credit to two credits and focus on a specific topic of public relations. Before graduating, students also must pass a comprehensive exam. The program courses are outlined as shown in Figure 5 (Rowan University, 2005, p. 45).

**Figure 5**
PR Graduate Program Requirements – Rowan University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Public Relations Core: 21-24 Semester Hours (S.H.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations Overview (Corporate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or School Public Relations* (Educational) (3 s.h.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques in Communication (3 s.h.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Communication Research (3 s.h.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grad Case Studies in Public Relations (1 s.h.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations Planning (2 s.h.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar in Public Relations (6 s.h.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship in Public Relations (3-6 s.h.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Modules – Elective: 9-12 S.H. |

---

**Graduate Student Needs**

Students pursue graduate school for numerous reasons; however, the ultimate reason tends to be for career advancement. Futurists have claimed that in order to remain competitive within the workplace, one must acquire professional development training.
equivalent to 30 college credits every seven years (Ebersole, 2004, p. 15). Due to the importance of continuing education among full-time employees, graduate schools are undergoing changes in demographics and student needs. In the future, graduate schools will be increasingly serving students who are older in age and who are seeking part-time programs that provide the option of online instruction.

By offering part-time programs, graduate schools accommodate those students who hold full-time jobs and/or have family responsibilities. For many students holding full-time jobs, part-time graduate programs offer a way to maintain a source of income and oftentimes receive tuition reimbursement. In addition, online learning is becoming more appealing for these part-time graduate students with careers. “Sixty-five percent of schools offering face-to-face courses also offer graduate courses online” (Anderson, 2006, p. 34).

In addition to part-time programs with online instruction, graduate students are also in need of other services. Research indicates that evening and weekend courses, as well as off-site courses, would assist working students in accommodating their rigorous schedules (Ebersole, 2004, p. 16). Students entering graduate school well after their undergraduate studies may also benefit from orientation programs that help them become acclimated to their graduate program. The orientation programs can provide students opportunities to meet faculty and graduate students within their program. The orientation programs can also provide information about university procedures, library services and academic advisement (Polson, 2003, p. 61). The goal of such orientation programs would be to offer students a source of support, while also helping them integrate into the university community.
Assessing Graduate Programs

Assessment is an essential means for graduate schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. The article “If You Want to Know Ask: Assessing the Needs and Experiences of Graduate Students,” published by New Directions for Student Services, stresses the importance of assessing graduate programs in order to adapt programs according to student needs. The article focuses on four key areas to assess, including ‘student attrition,’ ‘student experiences,’ ‘socialization to a profession’ and ‘programming for graduate students.’ The aim of assessing ‘student attrition’ is to identify reasons for retention and drop-out rates. Assessments of ‘student experiences’ should answer questions regarding the students’ reasons for attending graduate school and their opinions regarding the quality of the coursework, the effectiveness of the program and whether their overall expectations were met. Assessing the students’ ‘socialization to a profession’ involves identifying the students’ abilities to form positive professional relationships with the faculty and students, in addition to becoming accustomed to the norms and values of the program.

Assessments of ‘programming for graduate students’ evaluate the effectiveness of student services, such as orientation programs (Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006, p. 5-8). “Assessment of students’ needs is closely related to the assessment of students’ satisfaction with their educational experiences” (p. 9). Overall, assessments are an essential piece required in maintaining a graduate program that meets student needs. The assessment used for this thesis study concentrated on the ‘student experiences’ of the PR graduate alumni of Rowan University.
Purpose of Study

This thesis attempted to reveal the current trends in graduate education relating to adult learning theories, cognitive theories, online education and structures of graduate programs. In addition, the thesis sought to reveal the future direction of graduate education.

The study focused on identifying the alumni perceptions of the PR graduate program at Rowan University. The study aimed to identify alumni opinions regarding the overall effectiveness of the PR graduate program and the extent to which students were prepared to enter the PR field upon graduation. It also focused on identifying students' opinions pertaining to the quality of instruction, scheduling preferences and program requirements. All in all, the study proved the hypothesis that the PR graduate program may need to be modified in order to meet students’ changing needs.

Assumptions

With regard to the administration of the alumni survey, it was assumed that the alumni were honest and withheld bias when answering survey questions.

Delimitations

This study’s focus remained on the framework of the PR graduate program at Rowan University. Therefore, a comparison study involving the analysis of other universities’ PR graduate programs was not included. Instead, the study concentrated solely on the needs of the PR graduate program at Rowan.

The study uncovered the opinions of the alumni of the PR graduate program. The opinions of current PR graduate students were not included. The alumni were chosen to be surveyed since they completed the program, and thus, were able to assess the
program’s effectiveness in its entirety. Many of the alumni also held positions in the PR field, and therefore, could evaluate the program based on the extent to which it prepares students for a PR career.

The study did not seek alumni opinions of services provided outside of the PR graduate program, such as student affairs, library services, billing and parking. These services are not under the direct control of the PR Department. The alumni opinions of the graduate application process were also not sought in this study. The application process is a separate entity that falls under the direction of Rowan’s Graduate School Department. As stated, the study focused solely on the alumni’s perception of the PR graduate program at Rowan University.

Definition of Terms

Higher educational institution – an institution offering education beyond the secondary level; a college or university

Modules – “mini classes carrying less than three credits and meet only part of the semester” (Rowan University, 2005, p. 46); these elective classes offered by the PR graduate program at Rowan University focus on a specific area of PR and are usually .5 credit hours

Online Learning/Distance learning/Web-based instruction – students receive instruction and complete coursework off-campus through online channels of communication

Graduate education degree – coursework leading to a degree beyond a bachelor’s degree; usually a master’s or doctoral degree
Significance of the Study

Administrative personnel in graduate schools can benefit from the compilation of research presented in this thesis. Such personnel can consider the information presented on adult learning theories, cognitive theories, online education and the framework of graduate education when restructuring their programs.

The survey research provides valuable data for the PR Department at Rowan University. The research reveals the alumni’s perceptions of the graduate program. Thus, the PR Department can use the survey results when redesigning the PR graduate program.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to effectively redesign a graduate program, one must be thoroughly knowledgeable of cognitive theories, adult learning theories, current trends in education and the direction of graduate education programs. This chapter first explores how the brain functions and then leads into adult learning styles. Following adult learning styles, the chapter examines trends in education with the emphasis being on distance learning. The final portion of the chapter focuses on the how an effective graduate program can be maintained.

Cognition

To successfully plan and implement graduate coursework or programs of study, one should understand the meaning of learning. The constructivist view holds that learning occurs when one is able to make sense of information. Kauchak and Eggen define the doctrine of constructivism as a ‘view of learning in which learners use their own experiences to construct understandings that make sense to them, rather than having understanding delivered to them in an already organized form’ (Caine & Caine, 2006, p. 53). To aid students in making sense of things, educators need to offer more than instruction. Students need to have applicable experience. For instance, students training to be managers need more than a textbook on supervision. They need to also gain experience supervising or being supervised in order to develop a true understanding of supervision (p. 54-55).
In addition to gaining experience, students must also be able to make decisions. They need to be able to view and interpret circumstances and then determine how to respond to them. Elkhonon and Goldberg referred to this process as actor-centered adaptive decision making (ACADM). ACADM is the “key to constructivist learning. The learner finds himself or herself in an ambiguous situation that calls for decisions to be made involving some aspect of the field of study” (p. 55). To gain further insight into how learners process and interpret information, the functions of the brain must be examined.

Understanding the functions of the brain and how the brain learns is key in understanding how to facilitate learning among adult students. To begin with, the brain’s surface is comprised of a layer of cells known as the cortex. This part of the brain is most dominantly responsible for cognition. The cortex consists of regions, some of which pertain to sensory, association and motor functions. Studies have proven that as a human learns, his or her brain experiences physical changes within the cortex (Zull, 2006, p. 3-4). “The more regions of the cortex used, the more change will occur. Thus, learning experiences should be designed to use the four major areas of neocortex (sensory, back-integrative, front-integrative, and motor). This leads to identification of four fundamental pillars of learning: gathering, reflecting, creating, and testing” (p. 5).

Gathering data is a crucial part of the learning process; however, instructors must be careful not to place emphasis solely on the collection of information. Learning experiences must extend beyond review of content. Through reflection, students interpret meaning from the information presented to them. They activate prior knowledge to make associations between previously and currently learned material, and thus, the students are
able to make meaning from the collection of information. The third pillar of learning, creating, involves the students’ ability to formulate plans, theories and abstractions through making distinct associations between bits of information that have been gathered (p. 5-6). “This is the function of the front association cortex, and it represents perhaps the most elevated aspect of learning. It involves intent, recall-feelings, decisions, and judgments” (p. 6). Such is necessary for attaining a level of deep comprehension. The final pillar of learning, testing, enables students to test their theories and determine whether their “understanding matches reality” (p. 7).

Educators of adults can use this information to understand how to provide their adult students effective learning experiences. The primary goal of instruction should not merely be to transfer information. Instead, adult students should be led to process the information in order to develop their own theories and make value judgments (p. 8). No matter the age of the adult learner, “the neurological nature of learning strongly suggest that there is no age of finality for any learning” (p. 7).

Adult Learning

History of Adult Learning

Higher education has experience phenomenal growth during the past century. Following World War II, earning a college degree broadened from being available to the elite to eventually being available to all. Throughout this time period, institutes of higher education also experienced a shift in enrollment trends. “By the mid-1990s, persons over age twenty-five constituted almost 44 percent of higher education enrollments.” By 2004, over 25 percent of people in this age category held four-year degrees (Maehl, 2004, p. 5). Maehl refers to this phenomenon as an “adult degree revolution.”
During the post World War II era, the perception of adult learning changed. The war had unveiled adults’ abilities to learn at high levels. The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 led to an influx of veterans in higher education. In addition, adults without a high school diploma could have the opportunity to attend college by passing the General Educational Development (GED) examination. A community college movement also emerged during this period (p. 6).

In the 1960s, younger students protested the ‘irrelevance’ they detected in their education. This prompted higher education institutions to implement changes tailored to students’ needs such as offering a wider range of degree programs and offering evening college degrees. In the 1970s, the government played a part in promoting education through the 1972 Higher Education Amendments and the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education in 1973. The term, nontraditional, was used to refer to adult learners; however, some felt this term implied that these students were an outside entity of the college community (p. 6-7).

At the start of the 1980s, some higher education leaders feared that the steady rise in enrollments previously witnessed would come to a halt due to the decrease in birthrates after 1964. On the contrary, “higher education enrollment in the 1980s rose by 10 percent” (p. 10). This, in part, was due to the enrollment of baby boomers. Many who had not formerly earned college degrees opted to pursue them. Many who did hold college degrees decided to pursue graduate degrees. As stated previously, almost 50 percent of higher education enrollment by the mid-1990s consisted of adult learners over the age of twenty-five (p. 5).
With regard to the start of the twenty-first century, Maehl describes adult higher education as ‘volatile.’ He poses the following questions to educators: “What impact will digital technology have on the structure of higher education and society at large? What issues of ethics and equity arise as technology-based education spreads...?” (p. 14).

**Adult Learners & Making the Decision to enroll in Higher Education**

Adults decide to enroll in higher education for a variety of reasons; however, the strongest motivator is career advancement. A study by the College Board indicated that 85 percent of adults chose to enroll in higher education based on career reasons (Kasworm, 2003, p. 5). Other reasons included personal transitions and changes as well as proactive life planning.

In 2000, an in-depth study, funded by the former Department for Education and Employment and the Scottish Executive, was conducted among prospective students to learn what motivates adults to make the decision to enroll in higher education. Those being studied were considering enrollment in one of six UK higher educational institutions. Three of these institutions were located in England and three in Scotland. The study aimed to identify what factors inspired or deterred adults to attend college (Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004, p. 291-294).

The study focused on six categories of adult students including Delayed Traditional students, Late Starters, Single Parents, Careerists, Escapees and Personal Growers. These categories are defined as follows. The Delayed Traditional students are those who are in their 20s and whose goals and intentions are similar to young traditional students. Late Starters are students desiring a new start. The category, Single Parents, consisted of mostly women. These students have the responsibility of financially
supporting and caring for their families. Careerists are considered to be those who are employed and are seeking career advancement. Escapees are those looking to escape dead-end jobs, and Personal Growers attend college to satisfy their interest in learning.

Research was conducted through questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. The interviews were deemed the most valuable source of information. The research focused on both the positive and negative factors that affect an adult’s decision to attend a higher educational institution. Positive factors that influenced Delayed Traditional students included interest in a field and acquiring education in order to become marketable in the workforce. Negative factors included financial concerns and lack of confidence.

For Late Starters, many were searching a ‘cathartic experience’ and had altruistic reasons. Negative influences included financial concerns and lack of confidence. Positive factors that influenced Single Parents were the need to obtain a good income to provide for their family as well as wanting to be a good role model for their children. Drawbacks for Single Parents were lack of confidence, financial concerns, time constraints, childcare dilemmas and assuming multiple responsibilities. Positive motivators for Careerists were career advancement and self-respect, and negative influences were time constraints and family responsibilities. Escapees aspired for improved career options with higher salaries but were negatively influenced by lack of confidence, financial costs and work commitments. Personal Growers were drawn to become students based on their interest in learning and on obtaining a sense of self-fulfillment but were negatively influenced by lack of confidence (p. 297).
As can be seen, many factors affect an adult’s decision to become a student. During the decision-making process, they need advisement on how to manage a wide variety of issues, including financial arrangements, career choices and time constraints. “The benefits of a ‘one-stop’ advice shop at a regional level may be considerable” (p. 312).

Career advancement tended to be the strongest motivator for becoming a student; however, maintaining a career while attending school also posed to be a deterrent. Part-time programs would be essential for such students, and “it will also be crucial to continue to provide incentives for institutions to create greater flexibility in the ways that provision is made available” (p. 312).

Needs of Adult Learners

With enrollment rates increasing among adult students, colleges have the responsibility to offer adult students learning experiences that best suit their needs. There are various adult learning theories that have been developed and studied over the years. Some include andragogy, self-directed learning and transformative learning.

Malcolm Knowles is noted for promoting the learning theory, andragogy, which is “...described as the art and science of helping adults learn” (Ross-Gordon, 2003, p. 43). His use of this term was recognized by American educators during the 1960s and 1970s. Knowles held that five assumptions could be made of adult learners. First, since adults make daily decisions regarding their personal lives, they are assumed to want a direct role in determining their learning outcomes. Secondly, adults have acquired much experience which can be linked to their learning experiences, and thus, they prefer to learn through ‘direct experience.’ Thirdly, adults are deemed to have a readiness to learn
when they possess a need to obtain knowledge. Fourthly, adults are “...presumed to bring a task- or problem-centered orientation to learning” (p. 44). The fifth assumption refers to adults’ motivation to learn. This assumption holds that adults are motivated by career advancement and other external factors but are most affected by internal motivators.

The theory of self-directed learning has been extensively researched and debated over the past decades. The research implies that “...although adults are likely to be interested in exercising some degree of autonomy in learning, faculty and staff who facilitate adult learning should expect diversity among learners and across situations for the same individual...” (p. 44). Grow’s interpretation of the self-directed learning theory encompassed four stages of self-direction. Within these stages, the roles of educators are described as coach, guide, facilitator and consultant (p. 44-45).

The transformative learning theory was presented by Jack Mezirow in more recent years. He defines this learning theory as ‘the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference...to make them more inclusive...and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action’ (p. 45). Perspective transformation is considered to occur as a result of event(s) that cause one to redirect their thinking. Overall, the transformative learning theory focuses on adult learners having power to make decisions that shape or transform their experiences.

Having considered the history of adult learners, factors that motivate adults to become learners and adult learning theories, one can now consider how an educational institution can best serve adult learners. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning...
named the following as the top institutions that best service adult students: (1) Athabasca University in Athabasca, Alberta, Canada, (2) Empire State College in Saratoga Springs, New York, (3) Marylhurst University in Marylhurst, Oregon, (4) School of New Resources at the College of New Rochelle in New Rochelle, New York, (5) School for Learning at De Paul University in Chicago, Illinois and (6) Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. Each of these institutions validate experiential learning, customize students’ educational plans, offer distance learning and provide student support and student services (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, p. 76-68).

These six institutions validate experiential learning by allowing students’ work experience to constitute as part of their program. Students gain credit for their experience through some means of testing or developing a portfolio. The institutions enable students to customize their educational plans by selecting courses, research projects and internships that best meet their objectives. The institutions provide distance learning, which offers flexibility to students with demanding schedules and/or who are not located within close proximity to the campus. In addition, these institutions offer student support and student services. For example, the Empire State College in New York offers many online resources through its library, and the institution also designates a faculty mentor for each student. This mentor collaborates with the student to develop a program that best meets the student’s needs (p. 76-78).

The research on adult learners shows that these students have specific needs. In order to meet these needs, it is essential for educational institutions to offer flexible programs.
Online Learning

Online learning tends to be a convenient option for graduate students who assume multiple responsibilities. As a result, online learning has experienced considerable growth. The article “What’s It Like to Take an Online Class?” reports the following statistics from the Sloan Consortium (Anderson, 2006, p. 34).

- “65 percent of schools offering graduate face-to-face courses also offer graduate courses online” (p. 34).
- “Among all schools offering face-to-face master’s degree programs, 44 percent also offer master’s programs online” (p. 34).
- There is a “22.9-percent overall increase in the number of students taking one or more online courses…” (p. 34).

These percentages are expected to grow, in part, due to the convenience online learning offers students but also because many students have already taken online courses as part of their undergraduate coursework and are comfortable with technology.

Despite the convenience online learning offers students, there are both positive and negative factors associated with this means of education. In her article, Anderson published the opinions of graduate students who have taken online courses. Some of the positive feedback included the flexibility students have with completing the course assignments within their own timeframe, as well as being able to travel and complete coursework while out of the country. One of the graduate students valued that online learners had an equal voice when participating in the online discussion forums. Many
students valued the feedback from instructors. Students who received sufficient feedback from instructors were more likely to be satisfied with the online course (p. 35).

Negative factors included frustration with instructors who did not provide clear expectations or did not provide ample feedback when students sought assistance. Even students who enjoyed taking online classes mentioned that they missed the traditional classroom setting in which there is face-to-face interaction. Other negative factors included discomfort with participating in online discussion boards as well as technical issues; however, many students felt the colleges provided adequate technical support departments (p. 35-36).

Empire State College, a State University of New York, has experienced success in delivering online education as well as recruiting online learners. This college was identified by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning as one of the top six institutions that best services adult students (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, p. 76). The article “Information Technology and Adult Learners at Empire State College,” published by Lefor, Benke and Ting (2003), offers insight as to how the institution developed its online learning programs.

At the time this article was published in the summer of 2003, Empire State College offered two full degree programs and was planning a third program for the fall of that year. The institution first offered online instruction during the 1995-1996 school year, during which 65 students enrolled in six online courses. By the 2001-2002 school year, the college had 5400 enrollments in more than 300 courses (p. 38-39). The institution had taken the initiative to develop and expand its online instruction due to student demands. Recruitment efforts were made within the existing student body as well
as among external prospective students. The college discovered certain demographics that existed among their online student population. “Online students are younger (the average age is thirties rather than forties), are more likely to be male (whereas overall college enrollment is over 60 percent female), and have a higher rate of employment” (p. 39).

Empire State College strove to offer online courses through a system which students could use with ease. The college opted to use a uniform course-management template. Instructors, thereby, were unable to select among varying course-management systems; however, implementing a single course-management template eliminated the need for extensive training and technical support since students taking multiple courses did not have to learn how to use multiple systems. The college found that online students also expected to have the convenience of gaining access to other services online. As a result, the college met this demand by providing many services online, such as application, registration and financial aid services (p. 38-39).

North Carolina State University is another educational institution that has made continuous efforts to develop its distance education programs. In 2005, the university reported that their “…historic and projected growth of the distance learning population has mimicked the national trend, having started with video-based courses, adding Internet-based courses, eventually developing full degree programs, and anticipating more than 15 percent growth annually” (Dare, Zapata, & Thomas 2005, p. 40). The university developed a survey instrument to acquire data from its distance learning population. The intent of the survey was to understand the needs of distance learners. The university also used the survey results to determine how the departments of student
affairs and technology could collaborate in offering distance learners services. Both distance learners and on-campus students were surveyed in order to evaluate any differences that occurred in their needs for services. A total of 778 students or 37.4 percent of the distance learning population participated in the survey study (p. 43).

The first survey section, ‘Experiences as a Distance Learner,’ was administered solely to distance learners. This section inquired the reasons for which distance learners chose to enroll in online classes. The reasons were as follows: “to accommodate work schedules (72.6 percent)...family obligations (42.3 percent), live too far (42.1 percent), prefer distance education (24.7 percent), financial (16 percent), other (12.8 percent), course not available on campus (4.2 percent), and on campus section full (2.8 percent)” (p. 45). The results from the survey section pertaining to ‘Technology’ yielded that 96.4 percent of the distance learners were satisfied with their computer skills. Furthermore, 90.2 percent connected to the internet from home, and 54.9 percent from work. These survey results show the level of comfort many students have with using technology along with the flexibility online learning provides students.

All in all, the convenience online courses offers students is undeniable. The statistics cited from Anderson’s article earlier in this section support that online education, indeed, is a growing phenomenon.

Maintaining an Effective Graduate Program

Recruiting and Retaining Students

To maintain effective graduate programs, graduate schools should examine their ability to recruit and retain students. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, an increasing
number of ‘adult’ students are enrolling in higher educational institutions. As a result, consideration will be given to how to recruit and retain adult students.

The article “Recruiting and Retaining Adult Students,” written by Janice Hadfield (2003), focuses on this very subject. The article reminds employees in higher educational institutions of the diverse needs among the adult student population. These employees are discouraged from adopting the ‘one-size-fits-all’ mentality when offering services. Hadfield claimed that adult students view themselves as customers paying for services through both their financial resources and their time; therefore, she claimed that “except for the quality of our academic offerings, excellence in customer service is the single most important factor in determining the future success or failure of our programs for adult learners” (p. 19).

Hadfield suggests that educational institutions adopt the following customer service guidelines (p. 20-23). “We serve our customers when we...

- …make our school their school.”
- …ask them what they need to learn.”
- …ask them what they do not need to learn.”
- …deliver what they need when they need it.”
- …put great teachers in the classrooms.”
- …deliver meaningful learning experiences.”
- …listen to their complaints, questions, and suggestions.”
- …‘walk the talk.’”
- …continuously measure our performance.”
Hadfield suggests implementing these principles by providing adult students an environment that meets their needs and helps them feel part of the college community. Possible measures for accomplishing this include giving adult students easy access to services by extending office hours of many student services departments as well as offering childcare during scheduled course times. Such measures would show that the needs of adult students are equally important to the needs of those considered to be traditional students. Hadfield highlighted the importance of allowing students to participate in customizing their programs to meet immediate needs and long-term objectives. The article also discussed that students benefit from professors who are knowledgeable, enthusiastic and care about the success of their students.

If students are satisfied and impressed with their experiences, than more than likely they will recommend the program to others, such as family members, friends, neighbors and colleagues. These word-of-mouth recommendations can become a strong contributor to the recruitment and retention of adult students (p. 24).

Graduate Public Relations Curriculum

In addition to providing quality customer service, offering a quality academic program is also key in maintaining an effective graduate program. The article “Searching for the ‘Ideal’ Graduate Public Relations Curriculum,” by Hon, Fitzpatrick and Hall (2004), discusses the results of a study that examined the curriculum of public relations graduate programs. The study stemmed from questions that arose concerning a public relations graduate program which fell under the college of journalism and communications. The program required the same core coursework that was required for the advertising, journalism and telecommunication programs, which also fell under the
college of journalism and communications. Some of the questions that arose pertained to whether there was an ‘ideal’ curriculum for such a program and whether the program was adequately preparing students to practice public relations.

A Public Relations Graduate Task Force was formed to conduct a study of the public relations curriculum used in graduate programs. The Task Force selected public relations graduate programs within the country and reviewed the curriculum. Additionally, websites were searched to identify specific areas of public relations that were in demand by industries. In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted among public relations professionals, leading public relations educators and students in the graduate program (p. 4).

The results of the research showed that most programs’ curriculum focused on mass communication and required coursework in mass communication and theory. Opinions regarding internship requirements were favorable. Public relations professionals placed value on the opportunity to gain real experience in order for graduates to be marketable when conducting their job searches. These professionals voiced concern that without this experience graduates may be categorized as ‘over-educated and under-experienced.’ The study’s findings also revealed that strong writing skills and understanding news media were deemed important. Public relations educators expressed the need to offer remedial courses for students who did not earn an undergraduate degree in public relations. The graduate students claimed they were satisfied with the quality of the program but not content, since they did not feel that public relations was sufficiently covered in the mass communication core courses (p. 5).
The Commission on Public Relations Education gives recommendations on graduate program requirements in its 1999 Port of Entry report. The Commission holds that the curriculum should require between 30 to 36 credit hours of coursework, with the focus being on public relations. "The report called for a curriculum that provides a 'great deal of flexibility' and one that is 'tailored to graduate student career objectives and personal interests'" (p. 3).

Having discussed curriculum for graduate public relations programs, consideration will be given to coursework that is available to students within a condensed time frame. As discussed earlier, adult students often assume multiple responsibilities pertaining to work and family which impacts their time availability for completing coursework. Intensive courses offered over a shortened period of time are sometimes a convenient alternative to the traditional sixteen-week courses.

From August 1998 to February 1999, a study was conducted among 95 graduate students taking a Public Relations Management course. The course was offered through a mid-sized Midwestern state university at off-campus sites. The 95 students consisted of 41 men and 54 women. The age groups were as follows: 24 in the 22-29 age group, 45 within the 30-39 age group and 26 in the 40 and over age group. The course was held on alternating weekends over a six-week period for a total of three weekends. The course sessions were scheduled Friday evenings from 6-10 pm and Saturdays from 8 am to 5 pm with attendance being mandatory (Fall, 2001, p. 42).

Students participating in the study completed a questionnaire. "The results demonstrate that student satisfaction as it relates to intensive weekend class participation can be classified in four domains: format, individuality, study habits, and academic
performances” (p. 45). Regarding levels of satisfaction across these four domains, the results revealed gender differences. The female students tended to prioritize opportunities to reflect individuality in their coursework and were satisfied with the study habits necessary for the coursework. The male students tended to value academic performance. The study also unveiled that as students enrolled in three-weekend courses after their initial experience, their enthusiasm tended to dwindle since the novelty had worn off. With regard to student motivation, the students receiving tuition reimbursement were more likely to be more concerned with achieving higher scores. In addition, the results showed reported levels of satisfaction of the three-weekend course from both students who were intrinsically and extrinsically motivated (p. 45-46).

This study worked with a convenience sample, and therefore, the results are not necessarily representative of the entire adult student population. The study does provide, however, valuable insights into intensive-formatted courses and methods for meeting the needs of adult students.

Providing quality academic offerings and customer service are essential for a graduate program; however, providing graduate students an environment in which they can succeed is also important. Scholars have determined that four factors relating to climate issues have a direct impact on graduate student success rates, such as whether students complete their programs and the length of time it takes them to do so. “Because such success factors reflect the environment in which graduate education is conducted, it is reasonable to suggest that these four are the primary climate issues for graduate students: financial issues, personal concerns, curricular requirements, and relationships with faculty” (Hirt & Muffo, 1998, p. 20).
Obtaining sufficient financial resources proves to be a struggle for many students. Oftentimes, graduate students do not have the same financial aid options that are available to undergraduates. Although some students may receive tuition reimbursement, students who are paying the tuition themselves may determine to complete the program at the rate at which they can pay for their courses. The second factor, personal concerns, involves the amount of support graduate students receive from friends, family and faculty members. “A quarter of graduate students who leave school report a loss of interest in their fields, over 40 percent are tired of studying, and nearly 45 percent are disillusioned with graduate work” (p. 22). The curricular climate also impacts student success rates since it impacts the size and quality of the program. Hirt and Muffo claimed that the fourth climate issue, relationships with faculty, is the most influential in providing a positive climate for students (p. 20-23).

This chapter reviewed cognitive theories, adult learning theories, needs of adult learners and online education, as well as provided some insight into how graduate schools can maintain effective graduate programs. The research conveys that students have specific needs and increased attention to their needs usually lends to increased rates of success.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

Type of Data Needed

The research design was developed with the intent to identify the alumni perceptions of the PR graduate program at Rowan University. The study aimed to identify the answers to the questions that fall under the following cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral data categories.

Cognitive:

- What knowledge does the alumni have of the PR field and how it relates of the content of the course offerings?
- What knowledge does the alumni have of the strengths and weaknesses that are present in the PR graduate program?
- What knowledge does the alumni possess that could provide insight into how the PR program could be modified?

Attitudinal:

- What perceptions do alumni have in terms of the convenience of the PR graduate program?
- To what extent did the alumni value the internship, thesis and comprehensive examination requirements?
- To what extent would the alumni value online courses and/or weekend courses?
(Attitudinal):

- What perceptions did the alumni have of the module system, quality of instruction and core courses?

Behavioral:

- How did the alumni locate (or learn of) the PR graduate program at Rowan?
- Why did the alumni choose to attend graduate school?
- Why did the alumni choose the PR graduate program at Rowan?

Source of the Data

The data was obtained from the alumni of Rowan’s PR graduate program. This population included alumni who graduated during the years of 1990 through 2006.

Means of Acquiring Data

A pen and paper survey was constructed in collaboration with the PR Graduate Coordinator, Dr. Joseph Basso. The survey’s purpose was to identify causes of the decline in enrollment and search for answers in how to redesign the program to meet students’ changing needs.

The survey consisted of five sections. The first section requested students to rate their level of agreeability on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 4 = Neutral; 7 = Strongly Agree). This section aimed to identify alumni perceptions of the overall program, quality of instruction, the module system and the effectiveness of the internship, thesis and comprehensive examination requirements.

The second survey section asked students to use a nine-point Likert scale to rate the level of effectiveness concerning possible changes to the graduate program (1 = Very Ineffective; 5 = Neutral; 9 = Very Effective). Some of the ideas included offering
weekend courses and online courses, eliminating the comprehensive examination and the use of .5 modules and making the thesis an option.

The third survey section consisted of multiple-choice responses that sought marketing data, such as how alumni learned of Rowan and why they chose the PR graduate program at Rowan. The fourth section contained open-ended responses that asked alumni to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program along with suggestions for change. The final survey section obtained demographic information.

Pretesting of the survey was conducted with a graduate-level class. Eleven students were present, which included six female and five male students. The students completed the survey and offered suggestions pertaining to the survey. The opinions were reviewed, and revisions were made accordingly.

The sampling size included 100 alumni who were randomly selected from a list of 304 alumni. This list was provided by the Public Relations Department at Rowan. In early December 2006, the 100 alumni were mailed the following: a cover letter that specified the purpose and use of study along with a deadline to return the survey to the PR Department, the survey and a postage-paid return envelope. A total of 47 surveys were returned for a response rate of 47 percent.

Analysis

The survey responses were entered into SPSS in order to produce computer-generated charts. The data from the charts was also entered into Excel to produce the charts for this study.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS OF RESEARCH

The following charts show the results of the survey. The sampling size included 100 alumni. A total of 47 surveys were returned for a response rate of 47 percent. Chart percentages that total less than 100 percent are indicative that one or more respondents omitted that item on the survey.

Survey Section One

Section one asked survey respondents to rate fifteen descriptors on a likert scale from one to seven with “one being strongly disagree” and “seven being strongly agree.” This section aimed to identify alumni perceptions of several aspects of Rowan’s public relations graduate program, including the quality of the program and instruction, the module system and the effectiveness of the internship, thesis and comprehensive examination requirements.

Figure 6: Survey Question One

![Survey Question One Diagram](image-url)
Question One: The Graduate Public Relations Program adequately prepared you for the work force. Of the 47 respondents, 76.6 percent chose the answers of six or seven, indicating they strongly agreed.

Figure 7: Survey Question Two

Question Two: In general, you were satisfied with the overall quality of the education you received in the program. Of the 47 respondents, 83 percent chose the answers of six or seven, indicating they strongly agreed.

Figure 8: Survey Question Three
Question Three: The facilities were conducive to effective learning. Of the 47 respondents, 57.5 percent chose answers six or seven, indicating they strongly agreed.

**Figure 9: Survey Question Four**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Seven</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question Four: The use of one-half credit courses that meet three times is an effective way to deliver course content. The results revealed division among the respondents’ opinions. Although 44.7 percent strongly agreed (answer choices six and seven), the same percentage, 44.7 percent, selected answer choices three to five.

**Figure 10: Survey Question Five**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Seven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question Five: The use of one credit courses that meet five times is an effective way to deliver course content. The respondents' viewpoint remains somewhat divided for question ten as well. Whereas 44.7 percent strongly agreed with the use of one credit courses, the same percentage, 44.7 percent, selected answer choices three to five.

Figure 11: Survey Question Six

Question Six: Offering three credit courses for all electives in the program is more effective than the module system. Figure 11 denotes that the majority of the respondents designated a neutral viewpoint regarding the replacement of the module system with three credit electives. The other respondents were largely divided.
Question Seven: Some of the electives could be effectively combined into longer courses. The majority of the respondents agreed with this statement; 78.7 percent selected answer choices five to seven.

Figure 13: Survey Question Eight
Question Eight: The program offered an adequate variety of electives. Figure 13 denotes that the greater part of the respondents agreed with this statement.

Figure 14: Survey Question Nine

Question Nine: The program offered quality electives. As with the previous statement, the majority of the respondents also agreed that the program offered quality electives.

Figure 15: Survey Question Ten
Question Ten: The way electives were scheduled adequately satisfied your needs in the program. Figure 15 shows that 74.5 percent of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement.

**Figure 16: Survey Question Eleven**

Question Eleven: The Full-Time faculty provided effective instruction. Of the 47 respondents, 82.9 percent hold a high opinion of the quality of instruction they received from the full-time faculty.

**Figure 17: Survey Question Twelve**

Question Twelve: Effective Instruction from Part-Time Faculty
Question Twelve: The Part-Time (adjunct) faculty provided effective instruction. Of the 47 respondents, 68.1 percent (answer choices six and seven) strongly agreed that the part-time faculty provided effective instruction.

Figure 18: Survey Question Thirteen

Question Thirteen: The thesis was a valuable part of your overall learning experience.
Of the 47 respondents, 66 percent (answer choices six and seven) deemed the thesis as a valuable part of their learning experience.

Figure 19: Survey Question Fourteen
Question Fourteen: The comprehensive examination was a valuable learning tool. Of the 47 respondents, 55.3 percent (answer choices six and seven) deemed the comprehensive exam as a valuable learning tool. The answers from the remaining respondents are distributed across the scale.

**Figure 20: Survey Question Fifteen**

![Bar chart showing percentages of respondents' views on the internship requirement as a valuable learning tool.]

Question Fifteen: The internship requirement was a valuable learning tool. Of the 47 respondents, 70.2 percent (answer choices six and seven) hold the internship requirement to be a valuable learning tool.

**Survey Section Two**

The second survey section aimed to discover the alumni's viewpoints concerning possible changes to the graduate program. This section consisted of question sixteen, which included ten descriptors which alumni were asked to rate using “one for very ineffective” to “nine for very effective.”
Three of the descriptors dealt with eliminating certain program requirements, including the comprehensive exam, one-half credit modules and the internship requirement. Figure 21 shows the results.

**Figure 21: Question Sixteen**

**Elimination of Comprehensive Exam, One-Half Credit Modules & Internship**

Question 16b: Elimination of comps

Question 16d: Eliminate .5 credit modules

Question 16e: Drop internship requirement

Many of the respondents found the idea to eliminate the comprehensive exam and internship to be ineffective. Regarding the elimination of one-half credit courses, 23.4 percent were neutral (answers four-six), and the answers of the remaining respondents are divided amongst the scale.
For question sixteen, four of the descriptors related to scheduling changes, including offering online courses, core classes in the summer, Friday evening courses and Saturday courses. Figure 22 conveys the results.

Figure 22: Question Sixteen Schedule Adjustments:

Offering Online Courses, Core Courses in Summer & Weekend Courses

Question 16a: Online courses
Question 16c: Core classes offered in summer
Question 16j: Offer courses on Friday evenings
Question 16i: Offer courses on Saturdays

The results show that the alumni responded favorably to the schedule suggestions, particularly to core classes offered in the summer as well as Saturday classes. Regarding core classes in the summer, 72.3 percent of the respondents selected the answer choices seven to nine. Regarding Saturday courses, 57.4 percent of the respondents selected the answer choices seven to nine.
Opinions pertaining to online courses and Friday evening courses were favorable; however, the opinions were not as high as the summer core courses and Saturday courses. For the question pertaining to online courses, 40.5 percent selected answer choices seven to nine. For the question pertaining to Friday evening courses, only 29.8 percent chose answer choices seven to nine.

Figure 23: Question Sixteen  Program Options:

Optional Thesis, Additional Writing Requirement & Full-Scale PR Plan

Question 16f: Make thesis an option
Question 16g: Add an additional writing requirement
Question 16h: Require students to create a full-scale PR plan for a client

The survey results revealed that 55.3 percent of the respondents found the idea to make the thesis optional to be ineffective (answers one to three). In fact, 29.8 percent alone indicated the idea to be “very” ineffective (answer one).
Regarding the ideas to add a writing requirement and to require students to develop a full-scale PR plan for a client, the respondents found these ideas to be effective. A total of 68.1 percent indicated the idea of adding a writing requirement to be effective (answers seven to nine), and 63.8 percent found the idea to have students develop a full-scale PR plan to be effective (answers seven to nine).

Survey Section Three

The third survey section consisted of multiple-choice questions. The respondents had four responses to select from with one of them being “other.” These questions aimed to discover how the alumni learned about Rowan’s PR graduate program, their primary reason for attending graduate school and their primary reason for selecting Rowan’s PR graduate program. Chart percentages that total more than 100 percent are indicative that one or more respondents selected more than one response for that item on the survey.

Figure 24: Survey Question Seventeen

![Pie chart showing how alumni learned about Rowan's PR Graduate Program]

- Undergraduate at Rowan: 34%
- Rowan's Website: 12.8%
- Direct Mail Advertising: 4.3%
- Other: 48.9%
Question Seventeen: How did you first learn about Rowan’s PR Graduate Program?

Almost 49 percent of the respondents noted they learned of the program through a source other than Rowan’s website, direct mail advertising or through being an undergraduate at Rowan. Of the 23 respondents who selected “other” as their answer choice, 11 stated that they heard of the program through word of mouth, three indicated they resided in the local vicinity of Rowan, two mentioned they learned of the program while attending undergraduate school (other than Rowan) and the remaining responses were miscellaneous answers.

Figure 25: Survey Question Eighteen

![Pie chart showing primary reasons for attending graduate school.]

Primary Reason for Attending Graduate School

- Career Advancement 72.3%
- Switching Fields 17%
- Desire to Stay in School 4.3%
- Other 10.6%

Question Eighteen: What was your primary reason for attending graduate school?

A total of 72.3 percent of the respondents indicated their primary reason for attending graduate school was for career advancement. Of the 10.6 percent that answered “other,”
their reasons were as follows: personal development, enjoyment of classes, to learn specific information and the need for further education beyond undergraduate studies.

Figure 26: Survey Question Nineteen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation of Program</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question Nineteen: What was your primary reason for choosing Rowan's PR graduate program? The respondents' answers were somewhat split. Of the 47 respondents, 51.1 percent answered reputation of program, and 44.7 percent answered location. The answers among the 8.5 percent that indicated “other” included: attended Rowan as an undergraduate student, offered graduate assistantships and quality of program.

Survey Section Four

Section Four included open-ended responses. The section requested that the respondents list the top three strengths and weaknesses of Rowan's PR graduate program. The section also asked respondents to state what changes they would make to the program as well as share any additional comments they had to offer. Some respondents left some of these questions unanswered, and others skipped this section in its entirety.
As a result, the following tables do not reflect the opinions of all survey respondents.
The tables include the most frequently recorded responses.

Figure 27: Survey Question Twenty

<p>| Question Twenty: |
| Strengths of Graduate PR Program |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency of Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Content</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Exam</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Classes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 20: List the top three strengths of the Graduate Public Relations Program.
The three responses that were most frequently listed were faculty, course
content/selection and the program's reputation. Of the 47 survey respondents, 72.3
percent listed faculty, 44.7 percent listed course content/selection and 21.3 percent listed
the program's reputation.
Question Twenty-One: List the top three weaknesses of the Graduate Public Relations Program.

The three most frequently listed responses included module courses, faculty and the comprehensive exam. Of the 47 survey respondents, 17 percent listed module courses, 14.9 percent listed faculty and 10.6 percent listed the comprehensive exam.

Figure 29: Question Twenty-Two

Question Twenty-Two: Suggested Changes to Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More reality-based coursework</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional three-credit electives</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More media-related coursework and resources</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 22: If given the opportunity, what changes would you make in the program?

Figure 29 shows the responses given by the respondents. Some respondents recorded more than one response, and others recorded none at all. The top three suggested changes pertained to course content, offering more three-credit electives and offering more courses and resources relating to media. Despite these being the top three suggested changes, a low percentage gave these responses. A total of 8.5 percent suggested some form of change in course content, 6.4 percent suggested adding more three-credit electives and 6.4 percent suggested providing more courses and resources pertaining to media.

Question 23: In the space provided, please share any additional comments. The majority of the respondents did not record additional comments. Of the respondents who did, the majority of their comments were positive.

Survey Section Five

Section five sought demographic information about the respondents, such as their gender, student status, undergraduate degree, the time at which they completed the program, employment status and living situation.

Figure 30: Question Twenty-Four
Of the 47 respondents, 74.5 percent were female and 25.5 percent were male.

**Figure 31: Question Twenty-Five**

Of the 47 respondents, 53.2 percent attended Rowan's PR graduate program as full-time students, and 46.8 percent attended as part-time students.

**Figure 32: Question Twenty-Six**

Of the 47 respondents, 53.2 percent attended Rowan's PR graduate program as full-time students, and 46.8 percent attended as part-time students.
Of the 47 respondents, 38.3 percent obtained their undergraduate degree at Rowan University, and 61.7 percent obtained their undergraduate degree at an institution other than Rowan.

Figure 33: Question Twenty-Seven

Of the 47 alumni who participated in this survey, 31.9 percent earned their PR graduate degree from Rowan five to nine years ago, 31.9 percent earned their degree 10 to 14 years ago, 29.8 percent earned their degree less than five years ago and 6.4 percent earned their degree 15 or more years ago.
Question 28 asked survey respondents to indicate their employment status while attending the PR graduate program at Rowan. Of the 47 respondents, 48.9 percent were graduate assistants, 46.8 percent worked full-time off campus, 2.1 percent worked part-time off campus and 2.1 percent did not work.

Figure 34: Question Twenty-Eight

Question Twenty-Eight:
Work Schedule while attending Graduate School

- 48.9% Worked full-time off campus
- 2.1% Graduate assistant
- 46.8% Did not work

Figure 35: Question Twenty-Nine

Question Twenty-Nine:
Living Situation while attending Graduate School

- 27.7% Single living alone off campus
- 23.4% Married with no children
- 19.1% Single with one or more children
- 10.6% Single living with one or more people
- 10.6% Married with one or more children
- 4.3% Single living on campus
Question 29 asked survey respondents to indicate their living situation while attending Rowan’s PR graduate program. Of the 47 respondents, 27.7 percent were single living with one or more people, 23.4 percent were married with no children, 19.1 percent were married with one or more children, 10.6 percent were single living on campus, 10.6 percent were single living alone off campus and 4.3 percent were single with one or more children.

**Summary of Results**

**Overall View of Program**

Overall, the survey results provided specific data. The majority of the respondents conveyed a positive view toward the program as well as the extent to which the program prepared them for the workforce. For example, 93.6 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the overall quality of education (question two). In addition, 89.4 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that the program prepared them for the workforce (question one).

**Primary Reasons for Attending and Selecting Rowan**

The majority of the survey participants, 72.3 percent, noted that their primary reason for attending graduate school was for career advancement (question 18). The primary reason for choosing Rowan’s PR graduate program was split, whereby 51.1 percent indicated the program’s reputation and 44.7 percent indicated location (question 19).

**View of Faculty**

The survey results revealed that most participants had a positive view of the faculty. For instance, “faculty” was the most frequently-listed response when
respondents were asked to list the top three strengths of the program. A total of 72.3 percent recorded “faculty” as one of their top three responses (question 20).

The results showed that the respondents were content with the instruction provided by both the full-time and part-time faculty; however, the respondents were slightly more content with the full-time faculty. A total of 93.5 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they received effective instruction from full-time faculty, and 80.9 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the instruction provided by the part-time faculty was effective (questions 11 and 12).

Components of the Program

The survey results yielded mostly positive feedback about Rowan’s PR graduate program; however, the areas that seemed to be most divided and yielded mixed results were the electives and module system. In survey section one, the results from questions eight and nine revealed that the respondents believed the program offered adequate electives that were of quality (see pages 38-39). Yet, the results from question four were divided. This question posed whether the use of one-half credit courses that meet three times is effective in delivering course content, and 32 percent disagreed, 14.9 percent were neutral and 53.2 percent agreed. In section two, question 16d sought respondents’ opinions as to whether one-half credit courses should be eliminated. A total of 23.4 percent were neutral, and the answers of the remaining respondents were divided amongst the scale (see page 43). Furthermore, “module courses” was the most frequently-listed response when respondents were asked to list the top three weaknesses of the program. A total of 17 percent recorded “module courses” as one of their top three responses (question 21).
The respondents’ opinions pertaining to combining some electives into longer courses tended to be more favorable. A total of 78.7 percent agreed with this idea (question seven). Question six posed whether three credit courses should be offered for all electives. Many respondents were neutral, and the remaining were largely divided (see Figure 11 on page 37).

Regarding other components of the program, such as the thesis, comprehensive exam and internship, the majority of the students found them to be effective (see Figures 18-20). With regard to offering online courses, summer core courses, Friday evening courses and Saturday courses, the respondents found these ideas favorable (see Figure 22 on p. 44).

Conclusion

All in all, the above results show that the majority of the respondents were content with most aspects of the program. Moving forward, Rowan’s PR department may want to look further into the possibility of adapting the module system. The department may also want to look into offering online and weekend courses if the need exists with their current students.
CHAPTER V
INTERPRETATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The secondary research showed the increasing number of “nontraditional” students who are attending graduate programs. Thus, graduate programs need to be structured in a way that meets students’ demanding schedules, which oftentimes include full-time careers and family responsibilities.

The quantitative research revealed that the overall opinions of the alumni of the Rowan PR graduate program were positive regarding most aspects of the program. The survey results showed that some alumni held favorable opinions toward the possibility of the program adapting its module system as well as offering online and weekend courses.

The study’s strength is that it provided specific data pertaining to alumni perceptions that could be interpreted through percentages and calculations. The main weakness is that 38.3 percent of the survey participants earned their Rowan PR graduate degree 10 or more years ago. Although their opinions are valuable, some of the opinions they conveyed may have had to do with aspects of the program which are no longer currently applicable.

As further research is conducted on this topic, a comparative analysis of other graduate PR programs would be beneficial in showing how other educational institutions structure their programs as well as the degree of their effectiveness. Due to some of the interests conveyed through the survey regarding the use of three-credit electives as well as online and weekend courses, further study of the opinions of current Rowan PR graduate students would reveal if these interests fit the needs of the program’s present
students. Finally, a field study involving alumni who currently work in the PR field would assist with uncovering current trends and technological advances that are taking place.

All in all, the ever-growing competitive job market lends to the need for employees to stay current in their field by taking professional development courses. This remains true for any professional regardless of their age or level of education. As a result, if educational institutions restructure their graduate programs when necessary to meet students’ changing needs, then there should also be a continuous demand for their programs.
REFERENCES

Anderson, M.A. (2006, July/August). What’s it like to take an online class?. *Multi Media & Internet @ Schools, 13*(4), 34-36.


Kasworm, C. E. (2003, Summer). Setting the stage: Adults in higher education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 102, 3-10.


