

2006-2029: CAN ASSESSMENT BE A MARKETING TOOL FOR YOUR PROGRAM? THE ROLES OF ASSESSMENT, STUDENT SUCCESS AND FACULTY IN PROGRAM SUCCESS

Kim Nankivell, Purdue University-Calumet

Jana Whittington, Purdue University-Calumet

Joy Colwell, Purdue University-Calumet

Can Assessment be a Marketing Tool for Your Program? The Roles of Assessment, Student Success and Faculty in Program Success

Abstract

The growth of technology in the last fifteen years has not only restructured existing degree options but has also created new avenues for a quality education. Institutions have recognized the need for marketing and promoting, but typically do not address the marketing of all individual degrees or programs within the institution. This can leave a degree or program struggling to justify not only its bid for institutional funding but its continued existence. What can busy faculty do to promote student success, promote their programs within the scope of their existing responsibilities, and keep in mind quality education?

This paper will explore how a degree or program can be marketed, and what tools are available to busy faculty who have educational quality and student success in mind. This paper will investigate how to identify and employ elements within a degree program that will market themselves to existing and prospective students. Authors of this paper have surveyed existing and potential students to find out what the essential components of a degree are of interest to the students' decision-making. Marketing a program includes addressing such things as course description, course content and the importance of an assessment plan and what role assessment plays in the process. Course consistency and course relevancy in the scope of the degree-seeking student are also essential considerations. Faculty within a program are key resources to the marketing success of their program within the institution.

This paper will also discuss how busy professors can use elements of their existing assessment tools within the ABET accreditation process to help them preserve and expand their programs.

Background

The Computer Graphics Technology program at Purdue University Calumet began in fall of 2000 with a few courses. During the building and promotion of the new degree program, core faculty conducted informal surveys of current students. These surveys were completed in class and the number of surveys completed consisted of 30 to 150. (Variables were due to program growth). We were interested in how students found out about the program, what they liked about the degree program, and what they looked for in a program degree in relation to career goals.

Top responses (in order of number of responses) were as follows:

How they found out about the program

1. They heard about the degree from family and peers
2. They heard about the degree from counselors in area High Schools and Community Colleges
3. They found the degree while surfing the Internet and contacted the advisors and faculty for more information.
4. There were a few responses to full-page newspaper ads.
5. There was no response to radio, local television stations or billboards.

What they like about the degree program

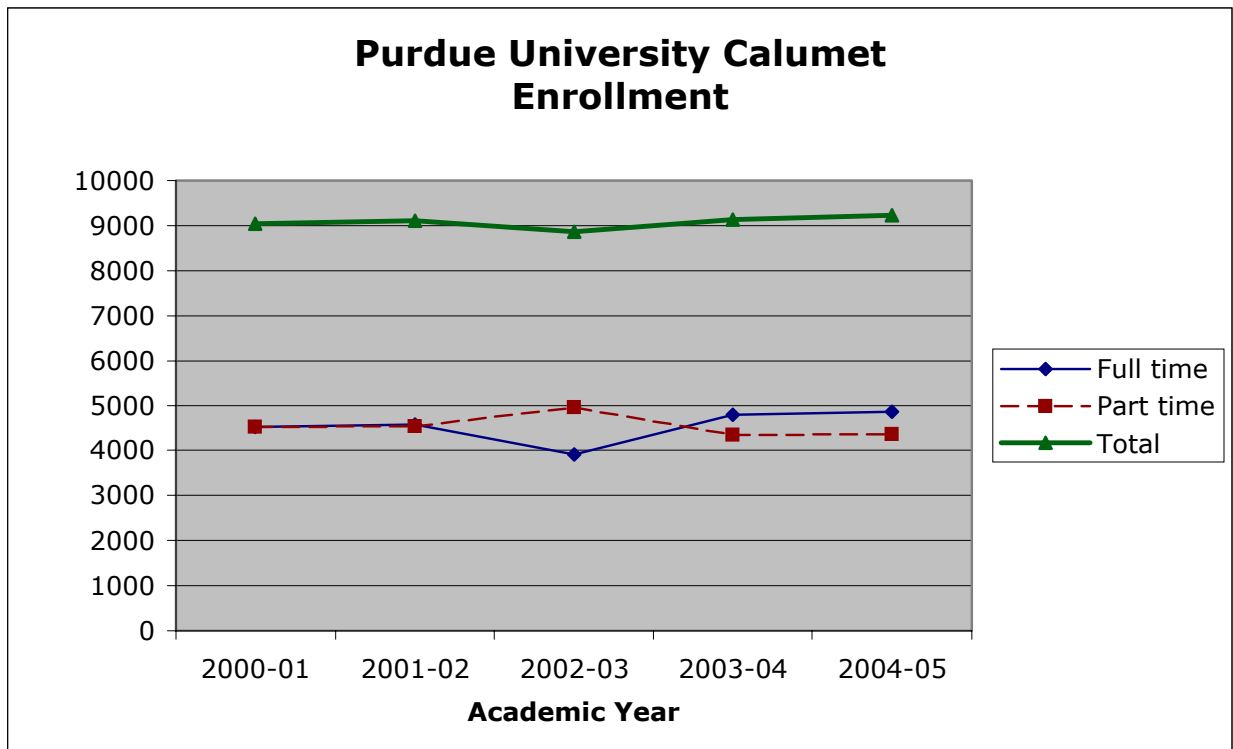
1. The faculty who put out the extra effort to help them and make the class exciting.

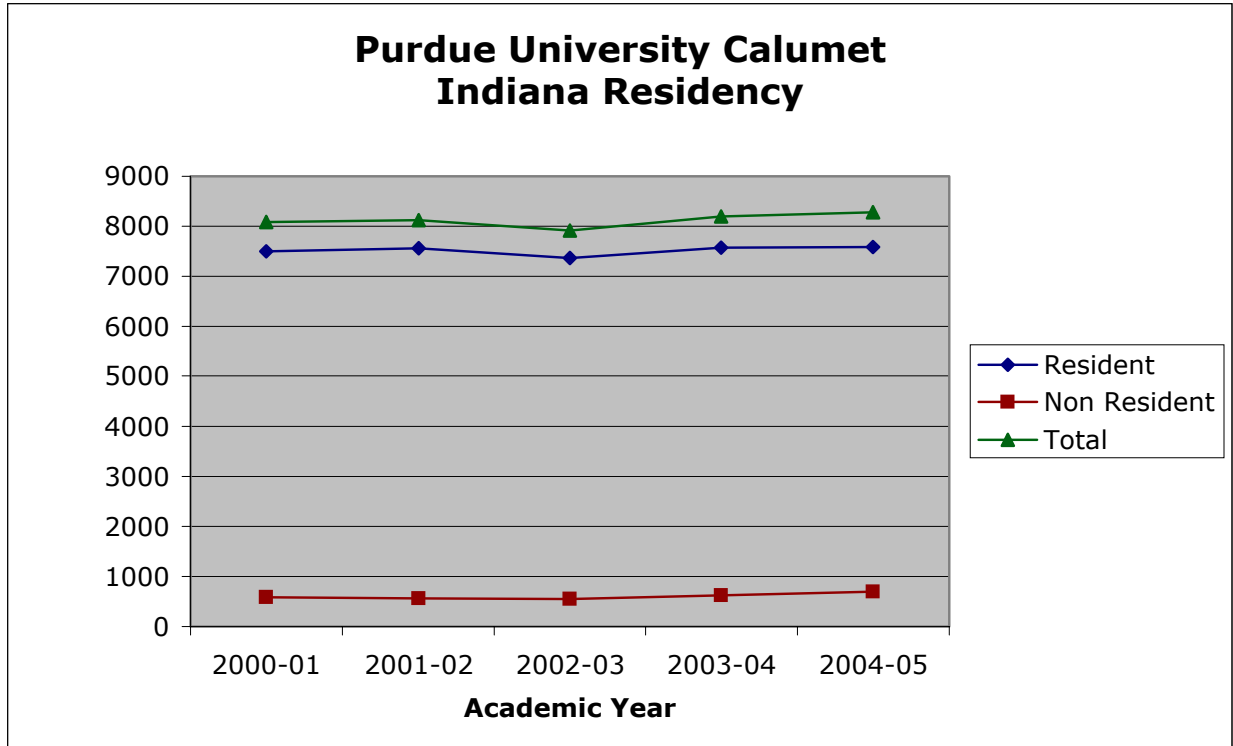
2. The small classes. Some attended other universities where they were a part of a large class consisting of 50 to 100 or more. They preferred 15 to 20 in a class.
3. The fact that faculty taught the course and ran the course labs instead of a graduate assistant.
4. The ability to take a combination of in-class, online classes, summer, evening and weekend classes. It was easier to work around job and family. Some stated without the variables they would not be able to attend college.
5. The ability to get jobs in their degree area while attending the university. This includes in class projects that incorporate real-life businesses and internships with businesses.

What they look for in a degree program

1. Something they are interested in
2. Good teachers
3. Convenience
4. Small classes

It should be noted that PUC is a regional campus of Purdue University, located in northwest Indiana in the greater Chicago area. It serves approximately 9100 students, about half traditional and half non-traditional students. Most of the students on campus work in addition to attending school. The campus is primarily a commuter campus, but does have some residential students. Some of the concerns in the student surveys reflect the issues and priorities of this type of student population. A primarily residential campus may find that other concerns have a higher priority for their students.





Discussion

The time when a degree or program can rely solely on the promotion provided by administration has long ended. The advancement in technologies such as the internet has afforded many new alternatives for students to obtain a higher education. The new alternatives are structured to focus in on specific elements of education directly affecting specific degrees or programs. For example, online degrees in several fields are now available from institutions of varying reputation. Since the focus is selective in nature, being degree or program specific, they do not necessarily affect the entire institution. This requires many programs to seek marketing strategies to attract those students that are considering these and other avenues of education.

The challenge of a degree or program is to differentiate itself from other colleges and universities and better fill the real needs of potential and current students. This need includes personal, imaginative and reliable solutions to their educational requirements, through the use multi-media solutions, the highest educational standards and better class offerings. The marketing challenge is to position one's educational services as the high-quality and best value-added alternative to other colleges and universities.

Marketing

Before any discussion of a strategy for development, it is necessary to understand the current market place. Strategy is about playing towards one's strengths and away from our weaknesses. We need to understand the target markets and their needs. The target markets usually considered are:

- 1) The graduate or soon to be high school graduate.
- 2) The student re-entering the educational market.
- 3) The transfer student.
- 4) The student seeking validation or furthering of their skills, who has typically been in the job market for a number of years and returning to school.

There are a number of factors or motives as to why a prospective student will choose a specific educational path. Listed below are a number of the motives that have been identified through survey data.

- Financial restrictions
- Academic difficulties
- Disillusioned with other institutions
- Specific academic program or department
- Technical School or community college
- New-found awareness of the University
- Work-of-mouth or peer reputation
- Maintain their employment level within their vocation.
- Increase their opportunities within their vocation.
- Validate skills that they have developed
- Retool for an alternative vocation.

Not all programs or degrees will have prospective students with the above set of motives, but they represent a number of determining factors in a student's academic choice.

The key to any successful marketing plan is to understand the needs of the market one is providing a product or service to. [3] The critical need confronting today's student is to obtain a quality education at an affordable cost. This has been and always will be one of the cornerstones in education. Along with the need for quality and affordability, there are specific requirements for the selected target groups. These requirements and program/degree opportunities include:

- Week-end workshops
- Community outreach programs
- Certificate programs
- Associate degrees
- Bachelor degrees
- Etc.

Promotional Avenues

A degree or program has a number of avenues available to promote themselves. These avenues should all be explored to achieve the goals of the degree or program. In no particular order, here are some of the activities.

Faculty Priority: There should be a concerted effort to establish relationships with the surrounding high schools. [1] An "Adopt a High School" program could be developed, where certain advisors, faculty, student representatives and/or staff would be responsible for maintaining contact with specific high schools. Current students within the degree/program can

be used effectively in this area. This should include meetings with students, counselors and teachers, spreading the message about the degree/program. Another aspect of this effort would be to attend PTA meetings, for example, to meet the parents of prospective students. It would also provide opportunities to meet older prospective students looking for additional education. Current students who participate in this kind of outreach effort should be carefully chosen and trained in how to help with this kind of contact. For maximum impact, this should not be an unplanned or extemporaneous effort.

Faculty Priority: The business community needs to be contacted and solicited in a very direct manner. [2] There are great opportunities in many areas which can be developed by forming greater relationships among this group. Businesses have training and education needs, and can provide internship and educational opportunities for students. The need for additional education is a prime factor always concerning the business sector. The staffing needs of these businesses are a prime source of employment for graduating students. Internships and part-time employment will provide students with added experience, income and greater educational rewards with the cooperation of local businesses. The successful student should also be made aware of such unique business opportunities such as the Lilly grant (among others) to further their future success.

Faculty Priority: A system can also be developed to promote the degree/program through trade magazines, periodicals and other publications using news releases as an avenue of exposure. This can easily be established and would provide additional means of promotion. Degrees and programs should not rely solely on university or college communications offices to perform this service.

Faculty Priority: In accordance with the renewal of relationship with high schools, promotional items can be developed which represent the professional nature and quality of the degree/program. These promotional items could include giveaways, such as: pens, mouse pads, tee shirts, screen savers, etc. There should be a concerted effort to design and develop a series of brochures that reflect the technical, aesthetic and professional attributes of the degree/program. This series of brochures should be kept “up-to-date” with current offerings and new opportunities to be effective. A consistent appearance and “branding” can help the degree or program stand out in the prospective students’ minds.

Understanding the burdens of time and demands on attention which confront the faculty and staff of a program or degree, the above suggestions can easily be achieved with the effective utilization of the current faculty and staff of the degree or program. It is important to get a clear and concise set of priorities for one’s needs and focus on them to be successful.

With any plan that is to be developed, a means of measuring the success of the plan needs to be established and in place. Some of the measuring guidelines can include the following:

1. Reach or exceed forecasted enrollment goals for the first year.
2. Maintain degree/program budget guidelines or credit hour targets.
3. Increase the ratio of quality students to the total enrollment mix.
4. Increase financial resources for the department or program
5. Augment financial resources through grant procurement.

It is a reality that a degree/program is in the business of providing the highest quality education at an affordable price. It is vital that a degree/program implement a marketing plan to maintain and increase the quality of education within the degree/program, while increasing enrollment of the more enthusiastic and academically successful students. A marketing plan is a continually evolving process and should be modified and updated on a regular basis. Just as old technology becomes obsolete, so can stagnant marketing plans. One must keep in mind that the main purpose of a degree/program is to provide a quality education for their students and to make the experience enjoyable for them. Anything less would be detrimental to the University degree/program.

Another important consideration in gathering marketing information is looking at the overall evaluation of the “a-k” TAC of ABET outcome-based criteria. ABET accreditation focuses on program educational objectives which are broad statements that describe the career and professional accomplishments that the program is preparing graduates to achieve: these are then linked to program outcomes, which describe the units of knowledge or skill which students are expected to acquire from the program to prepare them to achieve the program education objectives. [TAC/ABET criteria] An engineering technology program must demonstrate that graduates have:

- a. an appropriate mastery of the knowledge, techniques, skills and modern tools of their disciplines,
- b. an ability to apply current knowledge and adapt to emerging applications of mathematics, science, engineering and technology,
- c. an ability to conduct, analyze and interpret experiments and apply experimental results to improve processes,
- d. an ability to apply creativity in the design of systems, components or processes appropriate to program objectives,
- e. an ability to function effectively on teams,
- f. an ability to identify, analyze and solve technical problems,
- g. an ability to communicate effectively,
- h. a recognition of the need for, and an ability to engage in, lifelong learning,
- i. an ability to understand professional, ethical and social responsibilities,
- j. a respect for diversity and a knowledge of contemporary professional, societal and global issues, and
- k. a commitment to quality, timeliness, and continuous improvement.

The a-k criteria are evaluated and addressed in each course. Students respond on evaluation forms within each course and the instructor then have a base on which to adjust the course if criteria are not met. This can be implemented as a marketing tool by providing faculty with student perceptions of strengths within courses and the degree program as a whole. Alumni surveys are also conducted, and not only provide valuable assessment for course offerings, but also provide the faculty with marketing material on employer perceptions of skills learned in the program.

Our experiences

We have employed undergraduate students within the program to tutor in the classroom along with the instructors during lab times. A good student tutor is often able to relay to the instructor problems or concerns students, who for whatever personal reason, do not communicate easily with the faculty. This information can be a valuable assessment tool for the faculty.

During a marketing and promotion class project, students were asked to identify what would be interesting to them in searching out a degree. They were to use their own experience as well as friends, family and other contacts. In conclusion they found that degree and course descriptions in the university promotional materials did not tell them anything about the course offerings or degrees. They were more interested in career opportunities and how long it would take them to get their degree.

Students were later required to conduct research and create promotional materials and prototypes for a degree program. They came up with posters, flyers, brochures, postcards, mouse pads, screen savers, monitor cleaners, pens, pencils, car signs, t-shirts, hats and action figures.

In a digital video class students conducted interviews of other college students and ask them questions about the university they were attending. Most common questions in the interviews were university likes and dislikes. Top answers were a need for good passionate faculty, small class sizes, enjoyed students in class and a variety of course offerings. Dislikes were lack of close parking.

In response to our surveys and students responses we have created a flyer that is used for recruiting and informing interested students. The information explains to prospective students the degree programs in a quick bulleted list with career opportunities along with a list of proficiencies students can expect to learn.

We have also created a school of technology DVD, which is available to recruiters, high schools and community colleges. This DVD was created by faculty and students in the Computer Graphics program and gives them a good idea of what can be done in the degree program.

Faculty in the Computer Graphics program participate in onsite and offsite recruitment activities in conjunction with recruiters. We also write articles for local technical magazines and notify the university's promotional department about new degree or student information. This summer we will be conducting our first annual summer CG camp for area junior high and high school students. Currently the CAD coordinator hosts a program that brings high school students to campus during the school year to give them exposure to CAD programs and technology.

We have also articulated with some area high schools to help motivated high schools students gain college credit for specific courses. Articulation with community colleges has also been accomplished. This type of articulation requires faculty expertise and guidance. Another program in the department is experimenting with web presence, and tracking hits on its distance learning information site.

Conclusion

Although, the computer graphics program has had some success, we feel that we need to continue to change our marketing efforts and gain a better understanding of our strengths and weaknesses. Many of our students live at home or close to home, work 30 to 40 hours a week and are not sure if they want to relocate to another state or country after graduation. Since PUC has so recently become a residential campus (fall 2005), we have not had enough time to see if there are any effects of our student demographics.

What we have discovered through our experiences is that faculty play a large role in the students' perception of the university and degree program. The biggest complaint of students who transferred from another university or degree program was their perception of the faculty. If the students felt that a professor didn't care about helping them learn, they would change degrees or universities. Many students will site a professor's name as their inspiration for gaining a specific degree. Another concern from students included the need to be challenged by a faculty to learn new materials. Faculty are at the front lines of student learning, and assessment measures are needed to become a student-centered institution. It is up to the faculty to prove to administration what is needed to maintain a quality within a university. Faculty must create and continually update a marketing plan, which suits the needs and concerns on their target markets.

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