

Tracking Alumni

TRACKING ALUMNI TO DEMONSTRATE SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

The growing chorus of calls for accountability in education is putting pressure on independent schools. Proficiency testing is emerging in states throughout the nation, and in some places such tests are required of all schools--public and private alike--regardless of the merit or appropriateness of such tests. If independent schools do not do the research and produce the objective data which show that our programs and students are successful, it will not be long before others outside the private school environment define success for us and require us to meet external standards.

The Importance of Measuring Schools' Success

In order for schools to demonstrate their accountability, they must employ an approach from the business world--measuring success. Admittedly, it is not easy to measure the success of schools. While a CEO can immediately measure a sales department's productivity for the third quarter, how do you measure the intellectual, aesthetic social, athletic, and ethical growth of students? Can you attribute to the work of a specific teacher whatever progress is observable in his or her students? Besides, certain assets particular to schools--collegiality, cooperation, teamwork, and consensus building are intangible. And many teachers resist attempts to evaluate them.

Tracking Provides Needed Data

While intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, and other desirable characteristics in our students are indeed hard to measure, tracking certain factors in private school graduates is an effective indicator of school effectiveness. Tracking can provide concrete evidence that will enable our boards and the wider public to evaluate a school's most important product--its graduates--in important ways.

Tracking graduates will help us replace our current subjective evidence--"because our graduates and their parents tell us we have succeeded"--with the "hard data" our boards are increasingly demanding. All of us in the independent school community should be collecting "hard data" because we need it as armor to ward off intrusive thrusts from the state.

Tracking should be done at all levels. Elementary schools should track their graduates' success in secondary school, and secondary schools should track their graduates' success in college and afterward. And ISACS has launched an "alumni tracking" initiative that includes the instruments schools will need to track their graduates.

What Might We Learn by Tracking Our Graduates?

For elementary schools, we will find out, over time:

which subjects our students go on to do well in and which subjects they do not;
whether or not our graduates earn distinctions for academic work;
whether or not our graduates take math and science courses beyond the required levels;
the extent to which our graduates take advanced courses
whether or not our students go on to be active in sports and other extracurricular activities;
the extent to which our graduates engage in community service.

For K-12 and secondary schools, we will find out, over time, not only the answers to the above questions, but also:

our students' graduation rates (Since only 50 percent of college students graduate within six years, it would be useful to know whether or not independent school students graduate at a higher rate, as I suspect they do.);
information that would suggest how the programs and cultures of independent schools contribute meaningfully to producing graduates with both the academic skills to succeed and the character to stick with a college program.

But What About. . .

To the skeptics who suggest that the answers to these questions might not be attributable to attendance at an independent school, I point out that we can benchmark our results against similar data for high school students in "privileged" suburban high schools, our real competition, since those schools' students come from socio-economic backgrounds similar to the backgrounds of private school students.

To board members who wonder how we can "evaluate program," I suggest that the answers to the above questions could point leadership in the direction of making a wiser investment of resources to improve program and create a "halo effect" by showcasing the successes of a school's graduates.

First Attempts

Some schools have attempted to poll alumni to solicit records that will reveal how effective the school's program has been. Such attempts have generally been haphazard. But other schools are beginning to track their alumni comprehensively, and they are obtaining useful information. Western Reserve Academy in Hudson, Ohio, tracks its alumni as college sophomores and seniors and then again five and 10 years out. If more schools did this, we would have a significant body of information for our boards. Recently, ISACS has developed as well a Survey of Young Alumni of Independent Schools, a survey that may also be downloaded from the ISACS Web site <www.isacs.org> Just click on Surveys and choose the appropriate title.

ISACS Initiative Well Received by Colleges and Universities

In developing its "tracking of alumni" initiative, ISACS "field tested" sample transcript release forms by sending them to scores of college and university registrars. In return, ISACS received universal approval and endorsement of both the tracking concept and ISACS' instrument. Endorsement of the ISACS purpose, forms, and procedures were received from Amherst, Boston College, Colgate, University of Illinois, Kenyon College, Princeton, and many other colleges and universities.

Sample transcript release permission forms (for parent and student signatures) and transcript request forms (for secondary schools' or college registrars' offices) may be downloaded from the ISACS Web site <www.isacs.org> Just click on Monographs and scroll down to Curriculum. Then select the appropriate titles from the Web site.

No Legal Problems

Fortunately, school efforts to track alumni do not run afoul of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, commonly known as the Buckley Amendment. Enacted in 1974 to protect students' privacy rights, the Buckley Amendment does not prevent schools and institutions (such as individual independent schools and ISACS) from collecting student data for the purposes of scholarship, program assessment, and school improvement, as long as there is prior consent. A legal opinion to this effect is also available on the ISACS Web site.

Private Schools CAN Show Accountability

In short, schools have the right and the means to provide a substantive accounting of the further studies and activities of their graduates. It is up to our boards to expect that data collection and research will be undertaken, and it is up to our school leadership to collect and display the results as an indicator of "how we are doing." We should ask nothing less of ourselves.

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