

Applying the ALI Results to Improve Student Learning: Traditional & Nontraditional students

by Ursa Johnson, Institutional Research Technician, Mount Olive College

Abstract

This climate assessment study utilized Noel-Levitz's online implementation of the ALI to the student body (both traditional and non-traditional), as well as the paper-based CAEL Institutional Review Toolkit (faculty, staff, and administration). Analysis of the student data is derived both by the individual reports generated by Noel-Levitz, as well as statistical research provided by this institution utilizing SPSS software. As the numbers of non-traditional students rise, so does the need to accurately gather data regarding their unique needs. In this manner, the ALI can be used to discover what students need and what your institution provides. The institution can then work on a plan to improve their learning outcomes as well as illustrating some possible topics for an institution's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for reaffirmation with Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Insights of a researcher from a medium size private institution regarding a current project utilizing ALI results and how to successfully implement those results within traditional and non-traditional educational environments are shared.

Introduction

The Adult Learner Inventory (ALI) is an 8 scale student satisfaction survey developed by Noel-Levitz to evaluate satisfaction in the adult learners of higher education institutions. While the questions are comparable to Noel-Levitz's traditional student based survey (Student Satisfaction Inventory, 12 scales), the ALI questions center on a non-traditional population (Noel-Levitz website, 2008, para. 2). Noel-Levitz launched the Adult Learner Inventory in 2002 in cooperation with CAEL as the demand for an adult learner satisfaction survey grew (The Adult Learner Inventory guide, 2005, pg. 3). The choice to use the ALI as primary climate survey was due to Mount Olive College's student population consisting of approximately 80% "non-traditional" students. Therefore, administering a survey based on typically traditional services such as 'dorm-like environment' to the entire population would not represent the entire student population.

CAEL's Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) is a self-study applied to the administration body of the institution. According to CAEL, "The Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) allows members of the institutional community (leaders, faculty, and staff) to systematically evaluate the institution's structures, processes, and communications to determine the degree to which they are consistent with best practice according the nine principles" (CAEL, pg. 2). The purpose of the ISAS is to provide a gap analysis of what services Mount Olive College believes it offers and then how much of their students they perceive use those services. One advantage of the ISAS is that the report generated

also compares the same 45 other participating institutions with their results found within their ALI. The ISAS provides an Analytical Crosswalk between the questions proposed to the students and the 57 questions posed to the administration, faculty, and staff of the institution.

Understanding how satisfied students are and what they find important is the key to providing solid learning outcomes. Utilizing national surveys like Noel-Levitz's Adult Learner Inventory (ALI), an institution gains insight to improve their learning outcomes. These results combined with The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) provide the gap analysis needed to assess how satisfied students are compared to how well an institution believes they satisfy students. The implementation of both the ALI and ISAS is the beginning of the process to evaluate an institution's learning outcomes. It also may signify the first step in the process of developing a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) in conjunction with affirmation.

Method

This assessment study utilized Noel-Levitz's online implementation of the ALI to the student body (entire body, both traditional and non-traditional), as well as the paper based CAEL institutional review toolkit. Analysis of the student data is derived both by the individual reports generated by Noel-Levitz, as well as statistical research provided by this institution utilizing SPSS software. As the numbers of non-traditional students rise, so does the need to accurately gather data regarding their unique needs. In this manner, the ALI can be used to discover what students need and what your institution provides. The institution can then work on a plan to improve their learning outcomes.

In the spring of 2008, Mount Olive College administered the ALI to 4,090 students, including all campuses. The email invitations were issued in three intervals, (February 15th, 2008 through March 3rd, 2008) by Noel-Levitz staff driven by a Mount Olive College loader CSV file. All students were included, from traditional to non-traditional, and representing all campuses. The Adult Learner Inventory's 8 scales are: Outreach, Life and Career Planning, Financing, Assessment of Learning Outcomes, Teaching-Learning Process, Student Support Systems, Technology, and Transitions (The Adult Learner Inventory Report, 2008, pg. 1). These scales are tailored to measure aspects of an institution's services as received by a non-traditional student.

These 57 questions range from 7 (very important and/or very satisfied) to 1 (not important / not satisfied at all) and 0 (does not apply). In addition to the 8 scales, the datasheet also represented questions in which the student declined to answer as "blank". 745 student surveys were returned, 721

of those were completed fully. In an attempt to accurately capture data that represented Mount Olive College's traditional student body, 10 questions were added to include the traditional student body of Mount Olive College. The possible responses of 57 questions of the ALI survey range from 1 which is "not satisfied [important] at all", 2 "not very satisfied [important]", 3 "somewhat dissatisfied [unimportant]", 4 "neutral", 5 "somewhat satisfied [important]", 6 "satisfied [important]", and 7 "very satisfied [important]" (The ALI interpretive guide 2008, pg. 1).

Statistical reliability and validity tests were conducted by Noel-Levitz in which they reported reliability and validity for the ALI as satisfactory. They also reported that the survey was tested for internal validity "for homogeneity by calculating coefficient alpha" and concluded that the "overall coefficient alpha for importance was .79 and .83 for satisfaction" (Noel-Levitz, The Adult Learner Inventory Guide 2008, p.3). Mount Olive College conducted analysis of their spring 2008 survey and used Cronbach's Alpha on the Importance (question 1 – 47) with a reliability of .927. The reliability for the Satisfaction (question 1 – 47) utilizing Cronbach's Alpha was .957.

Results

The overall analysis of the Adult Learner Inventory resulted in satisfaction levels on the scale level of no less than "somewhat satisfied". The data extracted from Noel-Levitz's report combined with Mount Olive College's student record management system, allowed the institution to accurately identify student location, thus resulting in survey information based on traditional versus non-traditional population. In this manner, the institution could further extract information to differentiate the results in both a traditional and non-traditional educational environment. The response rate was 16% of Mount Olive College students emailed in this initial survey. Efforts will be made to increase future response rates on this annually administered survey.

The results of Mount Olive College's ALI were favorable. If the highest possible Importance / Satisfaction was 7 / 7, the lowest overall Mount Olive College was 6.46 / 5.50 found within Scale 2, "Life and Career Planning." However, even with a gap between the Importance and Satisfaction of .96, the satisfaction level is still above the neutral number of 4.00. Of the 77 questions found within the 8 scales, 24 of those questions resulted in statistically significant results in comparison to our National ALI Four-Year Institutions. Of these 24 questions, 23 of these statistically significant results were positive; meaning that 23 of these results proved higher than the National norm comparison group provided by Noel-Levitz (Noel-Levitz, The Adult Learner Inventory Guide, 2008 pg. 1).

Discussion

Experts at Noel-Levitz suggest that any number of 4.00 in satisfaction or lower should flag an institution to review immediately. Some requests require only distributing information that the institution provides services that the students were not aware of their availability. In other situations when dissatisfaction requires strategic or long term planning to remedy, the answer is not a simple fix. If a question regarding satisfaction in dorm conditions such as being too small or needing to be updated, then this is something that would need to be evaluated, funded and placed in the overall institution's long range Strategic Plan. While these students might graduate prior to the completion of new dorms, it is important to communicate to students that their voices have been heard.

Of the 8 scales queried within the ALI, when results were reduced to individual location (traditional versus non-traditional student populations, it was discovered that there was no significant difference between traditional versus non-traditional student satisfaction in the overall scales. However, further research into individual questions that were deemed to be statistically significant by Noel-Levitz discovered some difference.

Scale 5's **Teaching – Learning Process** question 29 states, “My instructors respect student opinions and ideas that differ from their own” (Noel-Levitz, The Adult Learner Inventory Report, 2008, pg. 2). While both populations reported similar importance (6.56 non-traditional, 6.55 traditional), the satisfaction levels differed. It is interesting to note that both traditional and non-traditional students considering instructor respect the similar levels of importance. Mount Olive College results of satisfaction results were 5.81 for nontraditional students and a result of 5.50 was reported for traditional students. This differed from the overall Mount Olive College results of 6.54 / 5.79 (Importance / Satisfaction). The National peer group for this question was rated at 6.50 / 5.97. Results report that traditional students appear to be less satisfied. There might be many reasons other than actual faculty performance to explain why traditional students perceive that their instructors do not respect them. The demographics derived from the self-reported portion of the ALI show clear differences between the populations. The Self-reported average age range of the traditional students was “25 to 35” rather than the reported “35 to 44” of the non-traditional population. The self – reported marriage status was 18.3% “Married / Domestic Partner” in the traditional body as compared to the 61.2% of the non-traditional student body. Finally, the self-reported workload outside of school (“31 to +40 hours per week”) was 17.2%, as compared to the 87% of the non-traditional students. A

hypothesis could be made that these demographic factors play a part in influencing a student's opinion regarding the questions posed within the ALI.

The ISAS Analytical Crosswalk provides an opportunity for the institution to compare their responses provided within the ISAS to the questions posed to the students in the ALI. Associated with the ALI, question 29, the ISAS questions 26e and 27e provide a perception from the view of the institution. Question 26e proposed, "to what extent is each of the following a typical feature of the curriculum at your institution" that referred specifically to (e) "emphasis on cultural diversity" (CAEL, 2008, pg. 25) Mount Olive College response was "About half". Therefore the question posed was how much is there an emphasis on cultural diversity within the curriculum. Some questions were raised regarding "cultural diversity", including what each institution and survey creator considers "cultural diversity". Another question to consider might be, "what is considered an emphasis?" One lesson learned as a result is this: Prior to implementing a survey such as this, review the questions and any terminology that seems nebulous, and request a definition both of the survey provider, as well as within your own institution.

The second corresponding question on the ISAS that was included on the Analytical Crosswalk was question 27e, "To what extent is each of the following frequently employed in the learning experiences offered by your institution?" This portion (e) of the question referred directly to the "use of student's own life and work experiences" (CAEL, 2008, pg. 27). Mount Olive College reported "About Half". This question illustrates the unique nature of Mount Olive College's non-traditional population in that they frequently have life and career experience that can be tied directly to the degree they pursue.

Scale 2's *Life and Career Planning*, ALI question 2 states, "Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term". Mount Olive College's results were 6.56 / 5.90 (Non-traditional) and 6.62 / 4.59 (Traditional). In comparison, the results of the National peer group for this question were rated at 6.33 / 5.30. As with question 29, there are aspects unique to both populations that explain some possible differences in perception. For the traditional population, there are a wide range of curriculum offerings, 75 possible 4 year degrees and 4 2-year degrees (Mount Olive College website, 2008). These course requirements are offered in traditional style 15 week courses, held in fall, spring, and summer term, including rotations. For example, a course such as HIS 240, African American History, is typically taught in the Spring term, every other year (Mount Olive College Catalog, 2008 - 2009, pg. 119). To provide credentialing for such a wide variety of degrees and courses could put a strain on limited faculty and or facilities to provide instructors and classroom availability. In comparison, the Non-traditional population degrees are tailored toward working adults in targeted

areas with only 6 possible 4-year degrees and 4 2-year degrees (Mount Olive College website, 2008). These courses are designed in a modular fashion, and those major courses are already registered and provided in a sequential lockstep progression.

The ISAS Analytical Crosswalk matched question 19k and 26l with ALI's question 2. Question 19k states, "About what proportion of the entering students at your institution experience each of the following" with (l) specific "A student contract of individual plan of study" (CAEL, 2008, pg. 16). Mount Olive College's response was "Most". Every student who declares a major at Mount Olive College receives a curriculum sheet that is customized to their plan, including any transfer hours from other approved institutions. ISAS question 26l queries, "To what extent is each of the following a typical feature of the curriculum at your institution" explicitly (l), "Flexible academic calendar with continuous offerings" (CAEL, 2008, pg. 27). The institution response to this question was "3/4 or More". Mount Olive College offers continuous enrollment that is a trademark of its non-traditional programming. The Analytical Crosswalk validates that the non-traditional students find course availability important and they are satisfied with those results.

The final scale to be reviewed here is from Scale 2, *Life and Career Planning*, question 35, "Mentors are available to guide my career and life goals" (The Adult Learner Inventory Report, 2008, pg. 2). Mount Olive College's overall results were 6.18 / 5.14 (Non-traditional) and 6.33 / 5.40 (Traditional). In comparison, the results of the National peer group for this question were rated at 5.97 / 4.87 (The Adult Learner Inventory Report, 2008, p.1). As with the other reviewed question, the demographics and environment surrounding the populations might illuminate the difference in perceptions of services available. For example, the traditional student body has direct access to faculty members such as deans and chairs due to said offices being located within the Mount Olive campus. These students also have direct access to the physical location of the Student Success Center, which includes the Career Center and the Teaching and Learning Center. And finally, traditional students have advisors for their field, for example, a music student's advisor is typically a full-time music professor. In comparison most non-traditional students are located on campuses that are not in Mount Olive (New Bern, RTP, Wilmington, and Washington), that do not have direct physical access to the majority of faculty members. This illustrates the same disadvantage occurring with access to the Student Success Center. Finally, while each non-traditional student does have an assessment counselor at each location, this counselor may or may not be an expert in the degree offered.

The ISAS Analytical Crosswalk matched question 19g, 28g, 28h, 46e, and 46l with ALI's question 35. Question 19g states that Mount Olive College students have "a single advisor or point of contact

from whom seek help” with a response of “All” from Mount Olive College (CAEL, 2008, p. 16). Question 28g states, “Frequent contact with mentors / advisors” with a response of “About ½” from Mount Olive College and Question 28h, “Proactive intervention by mentors / advisors” with a response of “About ½” (CAEL, 2008, 31). Finally, question 46e “Multiple site / face-to-face and non face-to-face career advising” and question 46l “Multiple site /face-to-face and non-face-to-face mentoring” was “indicated” by Mount Olive College (CAEL, 2008, p.53).

As with the other two questions reviewed, simply advertizing what services are available might improve the student perception of satisfaction. For example, the Student Success Center is available to all students; however, they might not be aware that it exists, or they might feel that it is only available for traditional students. Another possible outcome would be to change the hours of availability at times that are convenient to these working adults. It also might be possible to schedule rotating trips to all non-traditional locations. An effort could be made to improve communication by videoconferencing, e-mailing, web-site, and electronic newsletters. In regards to chairs and program coordinators, again, technology could be made available to improve communication between faculty and the non-traditional students so that they perceive that mentors and advisors are available to them. It is important to use untapped available resources first to see if that improves satisfaction levels.

Conclusions

Climate surveys are vital to improving the environment supporting student learning outcomes; an indication of how students perceive services and how an institution perceives the services provided is derived from an unbiased third party, then used to discover what students need relative to what the institution provides. Results such as those obtained from the ALI and exemplified in this paper allow colleges such as Mount Olive an opportunity to create focus groups. In this case, groupings of traditional and non-traditional students are examined; as the numbers of both types of students has risen, so has the need to accurately gather data regarding their unique needs. For Mount Olive College, baseline ALI results yielded indications that although services are currently provided at Mount Olive College, students may not be aware of when or where to go to obtain these services. Further review of this institutional assessment as well as academic assessment will assist the college in determining if any long-term strategic plans should be altered. Results from this climate survey will afford the college opportunities for topic suggestion regarding an institution’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for reaffirmation with Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The institution will then work on a plan to improve student learning outcomes.

There are six lessons learned from administration of our baseline survey that can be applied to any institution to gauge their climate: 1). Be aware of your student body profile prior to survey administration. 2). Be aware of the survey terminology definitions (both ALI and ISAS) prior to implementing survey. How your institution defines some terms might differ from those defined by the survey composer, as well as the other institutions that take part in the survey. 3). Promote your climate survey to receive the most benefit; increasing student response rates allows the institution to create a clearer picture of their environment. 4). When creating your panel participants for the ISAS, make sure that those participating have a clear understanding of the topics they will be assigned. As with the student surveys, the ISAS is a perception survey; consequently if the individuals participating in the survey do not know what your institution offers or how many students actually use said service, you are doing a disservice to your institution by using them as panel participants. 5). Be aware of who your institution comparison group is in reporting. How are their demographics different and if as an institution, they would not be considered peers, how does that, if at all, influence the comparison group as you examine your gap(s)? 6). Finally, make sure that your administration, faculty, staff, and students are aware of the results. The student population wants to know that their voices have been heard and while results might not be immediate, changes are in the process.

References

- CAEL (2008). *The Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Assessment Tool Report*. Chicago, IL: USA CAEL
- Mount Olive College (2008). *Mount Olive College Catalog 2008 -2009*. Mount Olive, NC: Mount Olive College
- Mount Olive College (2008). *Registrar*. Retrieved October 15, 2008, from <http://www.moc.edu/?academics/Registrar%20Homepage>
- Noel-Levitz (2008). *Adult Learner Inventory*. Retrieved October 15, 2008, from <https://www.noellevitz.com/Our+Services/Retention/Tools/Adult+Learner+Inventory>
- Noel-Levitz (2008). *The Adult Learner Inventory Guide*. Iowa City, IA: USA Group Noel-Levitz
- Noel-Levitz (2008). *The Adult Learner Inventory Report*. Iowa City, IA: USA Group Noel-Levitz