Sally J. Andrade and
Tammie Aragón Campos

Graduating seniors can provide valuable information about campus climate and the effectiveness of academic programs and student services. The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) created a Graduating Senior Survey as a component of its institutional effectiveness review. This article outlines the policy context, purpose, design, and implementation of the survey, including strategies to maximize campus involvement in planning and application of the results.

Using a Graduating Senior Survey for Campus Planning and Decision-Making

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education noted in 1999 that growing public demands for accountability in higher education have resulted in various quality movements, for example, assessment, post-tenure review, and performance indicators. Much of the focus continues to be on performance measures, such as freshmen retention rates, cohort graduation rates, or employment placement, many of which are beginning to have politically defined targets. An alternative dynamic is when faculty demonstrate creativity in their efforts to use feedback from students in their courses to examine and document the success of curricula and instructional techniques. Another element in the growing accountability movement involves the pursuit of more structured student feedback at the campus level to support improvement efforts.

One potentially important source of information in this respect is an institution's successful students, i.e., those who have completed their degree requirements and are graduating. Thus, designing a method for graduating seniors to reflect on their campus experiences, to rate their academic preparation, and to offer suggestions on how to improve the curricula, teaching, advising, and other college services represents an important challenge and opportunity. This may be especially true for metropolitan/commuter universities, which often find it difficult to engage their students in ongoing dialogue or feedback mechanisms.

When the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) initiated an integrated strategic planning and institutional

effectiveness review process in 1993, the university wanted feedback from its success-ful students. The Graduating Senior Survey design effort centered on answering one question: *What information can graduating seniors provide that will help UTEP to improve its programs and services?* The goal was to implement a survey that students perceived as meaningful and would, therefore, elicit thoughtful, comprehensive an-swers at a high response rate. To ensure that results will actually be applied later, several evaluation experts advocate that the potential users of assessment data should be involved in the conceptualization and design of the evaluation process (e.g., Fetterman, 1996; Patton, 1997). Thus, one of the major challenges for the managers of a Gradu-ating Senior Survey was to create interest and support among faculty, administrators, staff, and students so that they would both participate in the design process and then use the results for future planning and program improvements. Student involvement in the design and layout of the instrument was also important, because as one cynical colleague said, "You can get them to take it, but you can't necessarily get them to take it seriously."

This article outlines the process by which UTEP, an urban commuter university with a majority of Hispanic students, institutionalized its Graduating Senior Survey. Topics include an overview of UTEP's mission in relation to the survey, the design of the instrument, implementation and refinement of the instrument over time, and a sum-mary of lessons learned and implementation options for other campuses.

UTEP's Model for an Effective Graduating Senior Survey

In the early 1990s, the university reorganized its institutional research and strate-gic planning operations to create a center that fostered an integrated approach to stra-tegic planning, external reporting, and the assessment of UTEP's institutional effec-tiveness (Andrade, 1998). One major campus activity initially undertaken by the plan-ning and evaluation center was the examination of the university's mission statement and a clarification of its goals. Faculty, staff, administrators, students, and alumni representatives participated in a one-year process:

> One of the most hotly debated topics involved redefining the university's traditional focus on teaching into one of 'learning and teaching' as UTEP's first goal. The discussions included predictable statements about standards and quality, but they expanded to explor-ing the role of admissions criteria in a commuter institution made up primarily of first-generation college students. They also delved into topics of responsibility for student learning and academic progress, the current state-mandated remediation program, and measurement of the effectiveness of curricula and teaching (i.e., addressing ex-pected student outcomes) (Andrade, 1998-99, p. 46).

This new vision required a different, more comprehensive approach to strategic plan-ning. A primary objective was to phase in a coordinated series of student surveys that would provide ongoing feedback to faculty, administrators, and staff who were engaged in an improvement process and to the university's institutional effectiveness review. Within

this framework, the campus advisory groups to the planning and evaluation center identified the development of a campus-wide Graduating Senior Survey as a priority project.

Institutional Planning Objectives vs. Potential Relevance for Faculty

Because such a survey needs to be managed in a centralized fashion, some faculty perceived both the process and the resulting data as belonging to the administration, and they wondered if they would ever see the results. Some skeptical faculty expressed doubts concerning the value of student perceptions and opinions in relation to the faculty's emphasis on academic standards and quality, and others questioned whether useful, valid information could be obtained from students. Some were uncomfortable at developing planning and assessment activities that would be dependent on the low response rates that are often typical of such student survey efforts.

To address these issues at UTEP, the planning and evaluation center decided to engage in an incremental process, with notable involvement from faculty and student affairs staff, to develop the content and administration of the Graduating Senior Survey. This article outlines the process that was used to:

- build interest among faculty, administrators, and staff about the results,
- generate an effective and attractive instrument,
- create a distribution and collection method to sustain high response rates, and
- ensure use of the findings at the potentially most important level of program improvement, the academic department.

The model could be adapted by other metropolitan institutions, and based on UTEP's experience, the resulting availability of useful information and involvement of faculty in analyzing student perceptions of their campus experiences justify the effort.

Instrument Design

UTEP used a highly participatory process to create a balance between the difficulties and opportunities of generating institution-wide ownership and to maximize the usefulness of the results and the integrity of the data collection process. The planning and evaluation center requested assistance from a campus Graduating Senior Survey Task Force and invested considerable time and energy in recruiting its members and facilitating their work. In addition, the planning and evaluation center coordinated a series of focus groups using graduating seniors who did not participate in the pilot projects to obtain their feedback about the clarity of items and the comprehensiveness of response options. Students invariably identified important issues that had been overlooked and often helped to generate more understandable questions.

Expected Users of Results and Task Force Membership

There are many potential users of Graduating Senior Survey data. A variety of campus groups may be interested in the survey's results, while some of the external users might include employers, alumni, prospective students, parents, and donors and/ or taxpayers. The primary internal targets, academic deans and department chairs, are

generally interested in using information collected from seniors to improve their degree programs and student services, as well as to document the satisfaction of their graduates. The data might also be applied during strategic planning and academic program review processes, as well as for community outreach and recruitment activities. The data needs of each identified group should be considered when developing the questionnaire content and the reporting format for the Graduating Senior Survey.

The list of potential UTEP users of the survey data helped to generate a list of Graduating Senior Survey Task Force members. Each college dean was invited to appoint a representative, resulting in the recruitment of three associate deans and two department chairmen. Leaders from student affairs were also asked to participate, and these included the assistant director of Career Services and the director of the Student Development Center. To explore various distribution options, the group expanded to incorporate staff members with experience in the degree application processes of different colleges.

Purpose of the Task Force and Developing the Content of the Survey

The planning and evaluation center worked with the Task Force chair to establish a clear purpose for the task force, specify its tasks and timelines, and provide research materials. The following tasks were outlined:

- Identify what information graduating seniors can provide that would assist faculty, staff, administrators, and students in improving UTEP's programs and services, as well as helping to assess its institutional effectiveness,
- Critique the first UTEP Graduating Seniors Survey that was piloted without extensive campus planning and recommend needed modifications regarding its content, and
- Identify more effective methods of administering the Graduating Senior Survey campus-wide.

The Graduating Senior Survey Task Force set specific goals for each session. The first session was used to brainstorm, identify campus issues, and to determine the kinds of information that could be gathered from graduating seniors. The following four sessions focused on identifying potential items, and the final sessions then reviewed existing drafts of the Graduating Senior Survey for alignment with these items, as well as with elements of the institutional mission statement.

Identification of Campus Issues

Many relevant potential topics can be explored with graduating seniors: their plans after graduation, perceptions of improvements in their knowledge and skills, participation in educational out-of-class activities, satisfaction with their education, campus experiences and student life activities, overall ratings or assessments (the institution, their degree, their major), and praise or suggestions for improvement. First, the Task Force identified general issues that could be addressed with information from graduating seniors. Second, the group brainstormed broad areas for discussion, including academics, student support services, student profile information, and the administra-

tion. Within each of these broad areas, the Task Force identified general kinds of information that could be collected from graduating seniors.

Content and Format of Items

One of the major decisions guiding choice of items was the examination of the university's mission statement, goals, and expected outcomes for its graduates. Using the resulting list of issues to be addressed, questionnaire items were drafted. The next step required the Task Force to place the contents of the questionnaire in order of priority by using a process to identify specific potential users of the data collected through each item. Items were eliminated if they were not directly linked to a targeted area of improvement. This debate resulted in a more concise, directed questionnaire.

Implementation and Refinement of the Instrument over Time

The first administration of UTEP's Graduating Senior Survey used a direct mailing through the Office of the Registrar. The Task Force then piloted a variety of other methods to distribute the survey: faculty administration of the survey in capstone classes, direct mail through academic departments and colleges, and a combination of these three methods.

With the goal of increasing the student response rate, the Task Force reviewed the processes used in each college to clear degree candidates for graduation. The degree application processes were different in the colleges, but each procedure represented the best opportunity to make contact with every graduating senior in that particular college.

The planning and evaluation center staff identified and briefed key staff members in each of the six colleges about the rationale and importance of the survey. A package was prepared for each college with a tracking form and questionnaire sets that included the instrument, any additional pages for that college, a cover letter from the college dean in some instances, and a return envelope addressed to the center. After administering the instrument in each college through the degree-application process for one semester, each staff member was invited to participate in a focus group to discuss ways to improve the process. The exchange of ideas about the survey led to marked improvements, both in distribution and in the number of student responses. Other benefits included ideas about how to improve the management of required paperwork for the degree application and suggestions for scheduling students for the exit process.

At the end of the fourth year, the distribution of the survey was implemented campus-wide through this coordinated institutional process in each college. The impressive improvement in student response rates and balance of advantages in contrast to disadvantages represented a highly satisfactory outcome compared to earlier pilot approaches (See Table 1).

The final process that was institutionalized through this coordinated approach generated an average campus-wide response rate of ninety percent. In contrast, one college, which did not send a representative to the joint survey meeting, attained less than a fifty percent response. These results emphasized the value of a coordinated planning process that included a full range of faculty and staff (including frontline people). In addition to assisting with survey implementation, such involvement often stimulated a variety of student service improvement efforts even before results were obtained from graduating seniors.

Table 1

Development Process for Improving Student Response Rates through a Coordinated Campus-wide Approach, 1995-1999

Distribution/Collection Method	Response Rate (%)	Advantages of Process	Potential Problems
Direct Mail Distribution by Registrar to all graduating seniors (1995-6)	35	Large number surveyed at one time	Incorrect mailing addresses Longer process time Need for follow-up
Capstone Courses Pilot with one department Spring (1997)	97	High response	Possible breach of student confidentiality Difficult to duplicate campus-wide
Direct Mail from Department Pilot with two departments Spring (1997)	26-43	Student contact with department Follow-up support by department office	Incorrect mailing addresses Need for follow-up Possible breach of student confidentiality Difficult to maintain consistency campus-wide
Combination of Methods Pilot with three departments Fall (1997)	35	Opportunity to pilot surveys and processes	Difficult to manage process Increased need for tracking Longer process time Need for follow-up Possible breach of student confidentiality

Table 1 (continued)
Development Process for Improving Student Response Rates through a Coordinated Campus-wide Approach, 1995-1999

Distribution/Collection Method	Response Rate (%)	Advantages of Process	Potential Problems
Combination of Methods Pilot in all six colleges Spring (1998)	50	Engage all colleges in the process for the first time Explore the various degree application processes used in each college Test validity and reliability of survey for all colleges and majors	Possible reluctance to participate from the college offices Accommodating the degree application process in each college Difficult to manage process Increased need for tracking Longer process time Need for follow-up Possible breach of student confidentiality
Degree Application Process Final institution-wide process (1998-99)	88	Increase response rate Minimal tracking needed Ease of managing process Consistent process campus-wide Convenient for student Convenient for dean's staff	Adaptation to changes in degree application process in each college

Questionnaire Development

Over a period of several years, items were reviewed, examined in terms of the institutional mission and goals, and feedback from college deans, academic department chairs, and student affairs staff after they had had an opportunity to digest results from earlier surveys. A gradual evolution led to more focused questions, more comprehensive sets of responses from which students could choose, and a true appreciation of the open-ended questions that invited students to share their thoughts rather than mechanically check off a response.

The planning and evaluation center conducted pilot tests of different versions of the survey with graduating senior groups, and two pilot processes included follow-up focus group sessions. The feedback was used to improve item wording and formatting, and measures of their response times helped to establish a reasonable time required to fill out the survey, minimizing of which was one of the major strategies to encourage a high response rate and full responses to all items involved. The distribution of the survey was "piggy-backed" with other paperwork necessary for the degree application to reduce total time for the application process. The final instrument took approximately 20-25 minutes to complete.

The planning and evaluation center also worked to align survey questions on the survey with similar items on other campus instruments. The alignment of the questions allows academic leaders and policy-makers to examine specific issues by using data collected from students at various times during their campus experience. For example, entering students at UTEP are also asked about their academic advising experience on the New Student Survey at the conclusion of their orientation program each semester. UTEP students are subsequently asked about academic advising on a College Experience survey that collects student feedback every two years. The alignment of these questions also helped to improve the question format on each of the surveys.

With a well-designed yet flexible implementation procedure, a Graduating Senior Survey can also provide an opportunity to achieve unexpected data requirements for that target population. For example, in 1997, Texas legislators unexpectedly implemented a legislative performance measure of the number of first-generation college students who received baccalaureate degrees. UTEP was able to insert a question into the Graduating Senior Survey relatively easily (partially because the university had been piloting such a question on its New Student Survey for several years). The inclusion of this question allowed the university to provide feedback to policy-makers about how such an item might be phrased in order to offer comprehensive data quickly.

UTEP's current instrument can be seen by accessing the website of the Virtual Center for Formative Evaluation (funded by the National Science Foundation and administered by UTEP for The University of Texas System Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation) at <ampvi.utep.edu>. Examples of how several especially relevant items changed over time (e.g., plans after graduation, learning outside the classroom) and the rationale for modifying them are also available there. Addresses of other websites with Graduating Senior Surveys are listed in the Suggested Readings section following this article.

A Special Incentive for Academic Departments

To increase commitment for the use of results and to the data collection process, the Graduating Senior Survey was designed to give department and college educational leaders the flexibility to collect feedback from graduating seniors about issues specific to each department or program. Planning and evaluation center staff met with groups of academic department chairs and program coordinators in each college, inviting them to consider the creation of an "add-on" page for students in their academic field, and encouraging them to meet with faculty to outline the program's needs for information and to suggest question content. The following guidelines were used to manage the format and length of the department add-on pages:

- Don't duplicate questions already included on the general survey instrument.
- Limit the length to one side of an 8-1/2" x 11" sheet.
- Consult with center staff about content and format.
- Permit department or program to make the final decisions about the add-on page.

Planning and evaluation center staff provided technical assistance on survey design, question and response formats, data analysis, and reporting, and they also managed the incorporation of the add-on pages into the distribution of the institutional survey. In the third year of the model's implementation, about one-fourth of the academic departments and programs were using such pages to collect information from their graduating seniors. Topics and formats varied considerably.

Academic department chairs and program coordinators have an opportunity each year to revise the contents of the add-on page as the faculty's need for information changes. The add-on pages are printed in the planning and evaluation center, providing the flexibility necessary to manage the costs and resources associated with this customized approach to departmental data collection.

Follow-up Information and Results

Surveys such as this may generate a demand for additional information, and it often becomes useful to follow up with alternative or complementary information collection techniques to explore one or more topics in greater detail.

As outlined above, the implementation of the UTEP Graduating Senior Survey relied heavily on formative evaluation feedback. A reasonable question in terms of outcome evaluation is the extent to which its results have actually been applied in campus decision-making as originally hoped. Some examples of how information from the survey has been used for improvement purposes by different data users are summarized in Table 2.

While the feedback from graduating seniors cannot substitute for measures of their knowledge gain or skill attainment, their perceptions, when collected in a reliable manner and regular schedule, provide valuable feedback about campus climate and student satisfaction.

Table 2
Use of Survey Results for Improvement

Data User	Application of Data
Academic Departments	Program review Planning for programs, equipment purchases, etc. Curriculum development Seeking feedback from potential employers of graduates
Career Development Center	Review of services offered to students Documentation of students willingness to move, an issue of concern for potential recruiters visiting the campus.
Colleges of Engineering and Health Sciences	Inclusion in various self-studies done for external accreditation agencies
Planning and Evaluation Center	Responses to internal and external data requests Use for Institutional Effectiveness Review by the president and cabinet Report to the legislature about first-generation college degree recipients
Customer Service Advisory Council	Review of student satisfaction with advising, campus climate, and campus image
Graduate Advisors	Review of student satisfaction with advising and student's preparation regarding graduate school entrance examinations
Student Development Center	Use of some responses to stimulate discussions among freshmen in the New Student Orientation sessions held each summer

Lessons Learned: Implementation Options for Other Campuses

The UTEP Graduating Senior Survey was developed and refined over a period of four years. The university piloted a variety of instrument forms, question and response formats, distribution processes, and reporting methods. Some of the lessons learned may appear obvious, while others may be helpful to institutions of higher education interested in initiating or improving the implementation of similar student surveys.

Consider the data needs of as many users as possible. The use of the data and a commitment to the survey can be enhanced if a wide range of potential users of the information is identified and representatives are invited to participate in the design process.

Be patient and flexible about the process initially. Pilot-test several times as the process is gradually institutionalized. Share the results and probe regarding their interpretation. Invite feedback on the application of results and their usefulness for improvement efforts. Give items at least for two semesters, perhaps more, without rushing to change their format or content so that data can be compared over time.

Orient college and academic program support staff about the purpose and value of the Graduating Senior Survey, and involve them in its review. The staff personnel who have direct contact with graduating seniors can help increase response rates to the survey.

Encourage interest among department faculty by providing a customizing feature. Several department chairs and program directors became even more supportive of the survey process as a result of the invitation to collect program and department-specific data through the use of an add-on page that could be included with the UTEP Graduating Senior Survey.

Commuter students frequently move around the metropolitan area, and maintaining a university database of current addresses and telephone numbers is difficult and labor-intensive. Designing a cost-effective and efficient process, in particular one that does not require mailing instruments but is instead integrated into degree application procedures, avoids this difficulty. When the survey questionnaire demonstrates an interdisciplinary reflection of what really counts at *their* university, students have an opportunity to provide genuine, thoughtful responses.

Suggested Readings

Andrade, S. J., "How to Institutionalize Strategic Planning," *Planning in Higher Education 27*(1998-99): 40-54.

Andrade, S. J., "UTEP Jump-starts Strategic Planning," *Planning for Higher Education 27*(1998): 1-10.

Angelo, T. A., and K. P. Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, 2^d ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

Cross, K. P., and M. H. Steadman, *Classroom Research: Implementing the Scholarship of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, *Performance Indicators* (1999): <http://www.eriche.org/Library/crib/performance.html>

Fetterman, D.M., "Empowerment Evaluation: An Introduction to Theory and Practice," In *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment & Accountability*, D. M. Fetterman, S. J. Kaftarian, and A. Wandersman, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996) .

Patton, M. Q., *Utilization-focused Evaluation: The New Century Text*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

Appendix 1: Examples of Graduating Senior Surveys

Broughton, V. J. (1995) University of Minnesota-Duluth Graduating Senior Survey. Duluth, Minnesota: Institutional Research Office.

Pittsburgh State University, Office of Institutional Research (1980) Pittsburgh State University Graduating Senior Survey, spring 1980.

Texas A&M University-Commerce, Department of Institutional Research (1997) Texas A&M University-Commerce Graduating Senior Survey.

University of Northern Iowa, Office of Information Management and Analysis (1997). University of Northern Iowa graduating student survey.

The University of Texas at El Paso, Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning (1999) UTEP Graduating Senior Survey.

Appendix 2: Suggested Online Resources

There are no guarantees about the continued existence or regular updating of web sites, but accessing them is one of the best ways to review survey instruments at other institutions:

Virtual Center for Formative Evaluation, The University of Texas System Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation: <ampvi.utep.edu>

National Council of Measurement in Education:
<www.assessment.iupui.edu/NCME/NCME>

The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University:
<www.wmich.edu/evalctr/mtsinst>

The Class of 1999 Senior Survey, Harvard College:
<www.college.harvard.edu/seniorsurvey/>