LISTENING TO OUR GRADUATE STUDENTS' FEEDBACK: GRADUATE STUDENT EXIT AND ALUMNI SURVEYS

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ABSTRACT

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Student and alumni surveys have become some of the most widely-used methods of assessment of student learning in higher education. While the majority of literature on student surveys and assessment focuses on undergraduate students, this study looks specifically at why graduate student exit and alumni surveys can be valuable tools within a comprehensive assessment plan. Listening to the feedback of current and former graduate students, and then *acting* upon that feedback, is crucial for the engagement and success of this unique population of students who bring their particular strengths and needs to their educational experiences. This study examined how master's programs at Humboldt State University (HSU) use graduate student exit and alumni surveys. As part of this project, I piloted a graduate student exit and alumni survey for the Public Sociology program. In my study of the use of surveys, I found that most HSU programs were not conducting surveys due to lack of time and resources. Graduate Coordinators wanted to conduct graduate student surveys and do more to create graduate community, but they expressed the need for more university-level support to do so, including increased advocacy towards graduate programs. While most Coordinators were in favor of surveys being conducted centrally at the university-level, they emphasized the

importance of having a voice in the process and having program-specific questions on any survey. A collaborative process with a holistic and long-term vision is crucial to successful implementation of graduate student surveys at HSU and for student feedback to make a difference.

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INTRODUCTION

While measuring college student success has been something that universities and colleges have been attempting for decades, the most effective ways for them to attempt assessment is changing with the shifts in the very landscape of higher education. This landscape has changed drastically with rapid increases in technological usage, demographics of students and faculty, and political and economic challenges to education. With changes like these, what universities and colleges want to measure, and why, also change. One method of assessment that has been growing in popularity is surveying current and former students for their feedback about their educational experiences. These indirect methods have become the second and third most widely used method of assessment for Sociology graduate programs in the U.S., behind projects and theses (Spalter-Roth, Kisielewski, and Van Vooren 2016). Why has surveying gained so much popularity? Why are programs and institutions choosing to listen to their students' feedback? Why are they giving so much weight to the feedback? Part of the changing landscape of higher education is towards a more businesslike model, one in which the student is the customer of the university. This is one reason. Another reason is the fact that our students' feedback matters. Educators need to understand how students perceive their experiences in their graduate programs so that they can better meet their needs.

My research for this thesis on graduate student exit and alumni surveys began as a project specifically to develop and pilot a graduate student survey for the Humboldt State University (HSU) Public Sociology Department's Master's program. In addition to the continued use of standard methods of assessment such as projects and theses, the department wanted to implement a survey process that could be conducted on an annual basis to gather graduate student feedback about their experiences in the program. They would use this feedback to inform changes and improvements around different areas, including curriculum, student learning outcomes, advising, and program climate. The department also was interested in finding ways to create and maintain a graduate student alumni community. In order to build the Sociology survey, part of my research was to learn about what other HSU graduate programs were doing around graduate student surveys and alumni outreach; I also investigated any other best practices being used for assessment by other universities.

As with much research, the project grew. I began to uncover many layers around the who, what, when, how, and why of what other HSU graduate programs were doing, or not doing, around surveys. My resulting work evolved into a two-part study. One part was the pilot survey design and implementation for the Sociology Department. The second part became basically a program evaluation of graduate student exit and alumni survey activities at HSU. This second part of my research also grew branches that extended into some of the needs of the HSU graduate programs, the structure of HSU graduate studies (beyond the HSU Office of Graduate Studies), and how all of these pieces affect graduate student satisfaction and retention.

The first piece of business we had to iron out was to clearly differentiate between an exit survey and an alumni survey. This differentiation is important because the two types of surveys serve distinctly different purposes for an institution. They also can interact and inform each other, when conducted well. An exit survey is a survey that is given to students who are leaving the program. It can be given to students who are successfully completing the program and who are going to graduate, and it can be given to students who are leaving the program without successfully completing the program. That is up to the institution. Typically, an exit survey is administered close to the time of leaving, but before graduation. Usually, the goal of an exit survey is to capture the feedback of the student at that particular moment in time, when they are finishing their degree, and the experience is fresh, and somewhat raw, in their memory. In contrast, an alumni survey is a survey that is given to former students of a program sometime after they have graduated. It can also be sent to people who either did or did not successfully complete the program. Sometimes, institutions send alumni surveys out periodically at different time intervals. The intent is to gather the former student's feedback now that they have some distance from their experience and have had some time to reflect upon it. In addition, their perceptions of their experience may change over the different year intervals, as well as how their skills or knowledge obtained during the program apply to their lives and work. Often, alumni surveys also serve as an outreach method to fundraise or make community connections.

Before diving further into information on assessment, let me provide a little background about Humboldt State University. Humboldt State University is a public institution and part of the California State University (CSU) system. Founded in 1913, HSU is the northernmost CSU campus, located in Arcata, California. Students often are attracted to HSU because of the beautiful natural surroundings. Living in this rural town can be a very unique experience for some people who migrate to the remote Humboldt redwoods. Students are also often attracted by the small class sizes at HSU, with a student to faculty ratio of 21:1. The university has approximately 8,000 students and 578 faculty members. Programs in natural resources and sciences are nationally known, as well as HSU's commitment to social and environmental responsibility. As a CSU institution, HSU is primarily an undergraduate-focused university. There are a total of 12 graduate programs, three of which have multiple concentrations. These concentrations each have their own Graduate Coordinators.

Table 1. Graduate Programs at Humboldt State University

Program
Applied Anthropology
Biology
Business Administration
Education
English
Environmental Systems:
• Energy, Technology, and Policy
• Engineering
• Geology
Kinesiology
Natural Resources:
• Environmental Science and Management
• Fisheries
• Forest, Watershed, and Wildland Sciences
• Wildlife
Psychology:
• Counseling (MFT)
• Academic Research
• School Psychology
Public Sociology
Social Science – Environment and Community
Social Work

The structure of the programs and their concentrations sometimes leads to the concentrations functioning almost like their own miniature graduate programs. As part of the project, I interviewed the Graduate Coordinators, many of whom commented on the way the programs, and even the concentrations within a program, can tend to work in silos. This tendency to function in isolation is fueled by many factors, which we will look further into later. However, one factor is the perception that each program is distinctly unique from all the others, with students who have distinctly different needs than other graduate students of other programs.

For example, some programs need to actively recruit, while others are having to turn applicants away. Some programs are working to improve their graduate student retention, while others do not have retention issues. Some programs' graduate students are primarily coming straight out of an undergraduate program, while others' students are typically returning professionals. A few programs such as the Business Administration program must meet accreditation requirements each year. Some programs, such as the Applied Anthropology program, are typically online programs whose students live out of the area, while other programs typically attract students who live and work in the local area. Some programs are self-supported and do not receive state funds, such as the Social Work program. While each of these characteristics warrants unique consideration when trying to meet the needs of faculty and graduate students, my research revealed that programs also share many similarities in terms of their general needs and interests in exit and alumni surveys. My research makes recommendations for graduate student surveys and how to leverage program similarities to support graduate programs and students, while maintaining the flexibility to care for programs' individual needs.

My personal interest in this research stems from being an HSU undergraduate alumnus, now a graduate student, as well as the fact that I have lived in this community since 1990. Over the years, I have been interested and involved in efforts to help bridge the gap between the campus and local communities, in an effort to create a welcoming environment for HSU students, so that they may feel at home here. I feel that this is a crucial piece of their success as students to be able to stay and complete their degrees here, and potentially find jobs and make a life here if they choose. Many of the positive and negative experiences and challenges described by participants in this research are ones that I can relate to from my own experience. After graduation with my bachelor's degree from HSU, I stayed in Humboldt and made a life. As a returning student, being able to attend HSU for graduate school and not having to leave my job and family was a huge recruiting point. In addition, my retention as a graduate student and my ability to complete my degree has been dependent on the degree program fitting in with my "other life." So the implications of this research are pertinent topics for me. I am happy to contribute to the conversation around how HSU and HSU graduate programs can leverage graduate student exit and alumni surveys to better recruit, serve, and retain their graduate students.

A goal of this research was to establish a baseline for what is currently happening around exit and alumni surveys for graduate programs across the campus and compare that to what other universities are doing. To begin, we will first look at the unique characteristics of graduate students and what that means for schools that must meet their needs. Then we will move to assessment theory and what we know about making assessment a successful endeavor.

GRADUATE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION - A UNIQUE POPULATION

The Exclusion of Graduate Students

In reviewing the literature to inform my study, I found that assessment literature points to long-term systematic assessment plans as a key factor in understanding student satisfaction, therefore informing retention efforts. However, the majority of the literature focuses on undergraduate retention, as the populations of undergraduates tend to be much higher than graduate students, and more energy is devoted to their needs. I sought out literature specifically addressing graduate student experience and retention. What I found is that there is a notable lack of research that has been done around graduate student experiences and success (Delaney 1997). What little literature exists focuses on doctoral students or specific populations of students that share a common trait such as gender or ethnicity (Gordon 2016; Hardré and Hackett 2015). Why is there such a focus on undergraduate students and an exclusion of graduate students in the literature?

Undergraduate students make up the majority of a student population at a college or university, so more resources are directed towards undergraduates to maximize the investment and gain more from their continued enrollment and tuition. It naturally follows that faculty workloads would be more heavily weighted toward undergraduate students if their enrollment numbers are higher, which means it is that much more challenging for faculty to find time to give attention to their graduate students. In research on master students' retention at comprehensive public institutions in the mid-south, Gordon (2016) found that another reason for the lack of retention efforts towards graduate students is because their populations are harder to understand as a whole as they tend to be more heterogeneous than undergraduate students. They are harder to track, and it can be harder to meet their diverse needs; whereas, undergraduate students tend to be more homogeneous.

The focus of research and resources on undergraduate students is apparent in the literature around student retention. I found that not only was there a higher volume of literature dedicated to undergraduate student retention, but also authors would often not specify whether or not they were discussing undergraduate or graduate students. Yet, somewhere in the writing, I could surmise that they were concerned with undergraduate students. It is as if the subject of interest is assumed. Gordon refers to this phenomenon as “unconscious exclusion.” In their review of institutional documents, Gordon found “broad, sweeping statements found in the text studied that purportedly applied to all students at an institution. However, upon closer examination these statements referred only to undergraduates, not graduate students” (p. 100). I observed the same phenomenon in different documents and resources of Humboldt State University and in my discussions with faculty and staff.

Even if undergraduate students outnumber graduate students at an institution, graduate education is also a huge investment of time, funding, faculty, and institutional resources overall. Gordon warns that institutions must not underestimate the financial impact of graduate student retention and the success of graduate programs, and that institutions can benefit by seeing graduate student retention as a source of revenue. Gordon supports this argument for increased emphasis on graduate student retention by citing Alstete (2014) who reported that four-year public institutions with graduate programs are in better financial health than public baccalaureate schools, and thus can fare better in difficult financial times. When a graduate student is unable to successfully complete their degree, a huge amount of time, energy, and money has been lost by both the institution and the student. It is a loss for the student who has given up time and resources that could have been spent with family or on other activities, not to mention the economic cost if they have student loans that must be repaid. It is also a loss for the school who has also put significant faculty and university resources into the student's education.

Gordon delves into the important concept of "institutional commitment" to measure the discrepancy in efforts dedicated towards student retention. While an important aspect of a student's success is their level of commitment to the institution and their degree, this idea of "institutional commitment" also needs to be considered in the other direction, from the institution back to the student. However, retention studies do not address the relationship in this way. The responsibility of commitment is typically put on the student.

In relation to graduate student retention, Gordon also questions if this commitment by institutions to students tends to differ between graduate and undergraduate students. Even if there is, or is not, a real difference in the resources an institution allocates towards undergraduate or graduate students, the question is if the students *perceive* a difference in resource allocation. Even a perceived difference can negatively affect a graduate student's satisfaction in their program. Gordon cites Gregg

(1972), noting that "the degree of satisfaction experienced by the graduate student may be important not only for his level of performance but also for his remaining in graduate school and attaining his degree rather than dropping out before completion" (p. 34). To demonstrate this difference in perception, Gordon found that the graduate students he interviewed all solidly remembered undergraduate retention being an institutional priority at their school, but did not have that same conviction when speaking of the institution's efforts towards graduate student retention. Often they attributed the vagueness in their awareness to the fact that it is assumed that graduate students are adults and do not need as much hand-holding as undergraduates. Gordon also found that graduate students were typically unaware of the services and support that were available to them at their institution.

This lack of "institutional commitment" by schools to graduate students is also explored by Ault (1995) who argues that a main factor in graduate student failure is the actual structure of graduate programs. In a critical commentary on sociology graduate programs at the time, Ault stated that there are many intersecting factors between the individual student and the structure of the program that set students up for failure. One factor is that many sociology graduate students feel marginalized by the structure of their program. For example, at the time of Ault's article, the makeup of sociology full-time, tenured sociology professors was typically homogeneous, with white males being the dominant demographic. This did not reflect the growing number of female sociology graduate students. Ault speculates that a similar dynamic of inequality occurs with a lack of full-time, tenured professors of color not reflecting the rising numbers of students of color. Going further, Ault states that any graduate student who does not fit into the dominant group's expectation of what a graduate student "looks like" is "at risk." Ault describes the negative effect on students who do not meet the structured, one-dimensional ideal of a graduate student:

> What happens is actually resocialization, via the institutional forces of graduate programs, which subjugate all other personal statuses, orientations, and belief systems (such as mother, activist, African-American, etc.) to that of graduate student, professional sociologist-in-training (Egan 1989). From this vantage point, the resocialization process is fraught with potential negative social-psychological ramifications, depending on a student's expectations, self-image and prior experiences. Resulting negative self-esteem can lead to program interruption or worse, the abandonment of an academic career altogether. (P. 31)

It is important to look at how this is playing out in contemporary graduate programs in terms of faculty and graduate student demographics.

Another structural factor that Ault points out as detrimental to graduate student retention is adoption of more corporate models of education by universities. In this business model, universities must be more efficient with fewer resources. One way to accomplish this is a push for higher enrollment with the same number of faculty. As a result, faculty are not able to provide each graduate student admitted with the dedicated apprenticeship type of opportunity that the graduate student believes they deserve upon admittance. Additionally, the structure of the higher education system often pushes and rewards faculty for research work, which may come at the cost of teaching time.

Combined with the increased time allotted for a larger undergraduate student population, this lack of available faculty time for graduate students further alienates graduate students on the margin who may need more support in order to complete the program.

What Makes the Graduate Student Experience Unique?

So why should institutions think of graduate students differently than undergraduate students in terms of retention? Graduate students form a unique population with their own strengths, needs, and challenges that they bring with them to their degree program; therefore, they may need different kinds of support and resources than their undergraduate counterparts. Hardré and Hackett (2015) make the important point that the curriculum and courses only play a part in graduate student academic success. Graduate students may also be experiencing new developments as scholars, in their profession, and in their personal identity and personal life. These factors and more are intersecting to create what can be a very rewarding, but also a very stressful, experience. Consider the experience of graduate students who are returning to school after a period of time and changes in their lives and families since they were an undergraduate. These life changes can present big challenges.

> Graduate education involves redirecting cognitive attention and emotional energy in ways that can impact key relationships and cause family and emotional crisis. Success in graduate school depends on interpersonal and social relationships, as well as on intellectual mastery. Being back in academia after years away can be a tremendous adjustment, which is amplified when the return is to a different discipline, culture, and context, requiring substantial re-acculturation and socialization." (P. 225)

If challenges such as these are not acknowledged and an effort made to address them, graduate student retention will suffer.

In their research on master's student retention at comprehensive public institutions in the mid-south, Gordon (2016) interviewed both master's students who completed their program and also some who left before completing their program. One of the major challenges for graduate students was their commitment to their work or job. This challenge is not just in the time conflicts required for the work or job, but also the internal conflicts when they felt they were not meeting expectations for either school or work. Additionally, work was a significant factor in the success of graduate students, as they often chose their master's program because it matched the schedule or demands of their work situation. Sometimes they specifically looked for online programs to accommodate their personal lives. As one student described,

> Honestly, the time requirement. There are several programs that seem more closely aligned to what I do… but let me give you two reasons; the time required; and it's the availability as a web-based program. My thoughts are, a master's degree is a master's degree, and why take a forty-eight hour degree path when I can do a thirty hour degree path? With fall schedules and family obligations, I can't commit every Thursday night to be in class from 5:00 to 8:00. (P. 84-85)

Some of the other challenges that graduate students reported include feeling disconnected from their peers or campus, encountering technological barriers, struggling with time management, and meeting the costs of graduate school. Time management can be a major challenge for graduate students as they have to rebalance the pieces of their existing lives with all the new pieces of graduate school. This is especially difficult for part-time graduate students who often have "other lives" outside of school. In a 2011 survey of part time adult graduate students, Cohen (2014) found that the third most common reason for withdrawal from a program was family issues. The difficulty of juggling school demands with financial and health concerned leads part-time graduate students to feel overwhelmed. The importance of developing/providing resources for graduate students can't be understated. According to Cohen, "Students who have established a strong network of peers, faculty and administrators are more likely to persist in their education despite challenging family issues" (p. 2).

Gordon (2016) found that cost of graduate education can also be a show-stopper, and some students would not be able to continue if they did not receive assistantships or scholarships. Gordon found that there were significantly fewer graduate student scholarships opportunities compared to those available for undergraduates at the schools he studied. Ault (1995) questions whether or not teaching assistantship wages are even sufficient to make ends meet. Additionally an assistantship may only be guaranteed for a few years. For the graduate student working and going to school, the time required to get through the program may be longer than an assistantship may last.

Gordon also reports on the factors that graduate students said had the most positive influence on their success. All of the students interviewed stated that faculty support was the most influential factor in them continuing or completing their degree. For students who were part-time students who had work or family commitments, their relationships with faculty were even more important. For students in online programs who had less face-time with their faculty, their equivalent of faculty support was responsiveness and facilitation by faculty. The second most important factor for graduate student success was self-motivation. They saw their internal drive to complete their degree as part of the fact that they were in graduate school because it was their choice as an adult, not an expectation of them by others. The third most important factor reported was peer support. The personal relationships graduate students formed with each other reinforced their self-motivation. An interesting form of peer support mentioned was support from people outside of their program who had also completed a graduate degree. They acted like mentors, offering advice and guidance on how they may have handled similar situations. This was especially true for part-time graduate students who had less interactions with their cohort peers.

All of the factors that graduate students struggle with, and those which help them succeed, are important for institutions to understand and incorporate into their assessment plans. The limited literature that does exist around graduate student retention argues for increased efforts by institutions towards retention of graduate students similar to those directed towards undergraduates. Gordon argues that “universities have a moral obligation to provide all students with the most supportive environment possible to ensure student success; without study of graduate student needs, this cannot be accomplished effectively” (2016:4). *Not* investing in the assessment, retention of graduate students, and overall improvement of teaching and learning in graduate programs is just a waste of valuable resources.

How Can Institutions Support Graduate Student Retention?

Improving graduate student retention means that institutions must make a commitment to invest in structural and systematic improvements to support the unique needs of graduate students. Improvements documented in the literature fall into the following five categories: setting the stage with prospective and new graduate students about what to expect, facilitating graduate student community and social support, understanding the unique needs of graduate students, recognizing and supporting graduate student achievements, and giving graduate students a voice in the program.

First, institutions and programs can improve setting the stage at the beginning with clear communication and expectations. This begins during the recruiting process. Mokhtarian (2013) states that often recruiting and retention are separated at the structural level by institutions, but that the two activities are tied together and need to be thought of together for the success of the student. The first step is that the program must be clear on what its strengths and weaknesses are. This is critical in order to match the program outcomes with the objectives of potential graduate students. These strengths and weaknesses should be communicated with the recruiting department so recruiters can accurately communicate what a potential student can expect. Too often, a potential graduate student may have a good impression of the department or program from a recruiter but may become disillusioned when they realize the program is not connecting with their expectations or objectives. Then, if the student leaves the program, this may lead to bad word-of-mouth if they believe their failure was caused by poor communication, lack of information, or misrepresentation by the program.

Programs can also help to set accurate expectations by working with students on understanding the work and time that will be required to complete the program. Cohen (2014) reports that many part-time graduate students admit to being overwhelmed by the workload of the program, and did not realize how difficult it would be to go to school, work, and raise a family. Advisors need to be very clear and frank about academic expectations and the challenges that may result from them.

> During the application interview, one of our program advisors asks prospective adult graduate students, "What changes in your life are you making to be successful in the program?" The reason, she says, is that students will not be able to succeed in a graduate program without recognizing that life changes will be required." (P. 2)

Gordon (2016) documented both part-time and full-time graduate students who voiced a desire for graduate orientation programs that gives information on "how to do things" or "how to succeed," and less on formalities. Gordon attributes this desire to the way that some graduate students view their new academic endeavor through their undergraduate lens, and that orientation symbolizes a new beginning. Orientation gives them their first glimpse of the new culture they are entering into.

Another way that institutions and programs can support graduate student retention is through facilitating more social support for graduate students. This support can come in different ways, including: faculty, community and social events, and mentors.

One source of "social" support comes from caring faculty. Because faculty have a much closer association with graduate students, they form relationships that are crucial to students' success.

> Adult students seek a supportive learning environment in which faculty treat them with respect, understand them as adult learners, and are fair in their grading. Unfortunately, when students encounter what they perceive as inflexible and/or uncaring faculty or administrators, withdrawal can follow (Cohen 2014:3).

The caring attitudes of faculty towards students helps graduate students feel less isolated, since they are not part of the larger focus of the undergraduate population (especially part-time graduate students), and they also help to connect students with resources that help students succeed. For first-generation graduate students, faculty can be like family helping them navigate the ups and downs of graduate school.

A second form of social support that institutions and programs can help facilitate is increased graduate "community." Moore (2013) identifies essential elements of community as "mutual interdependence among members, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members" (p. 2). While participants in graduate student interviews that Moore conducted often stated they "didn't come to graduate school to make friends," they still said they wanted "connection with classmates and faculty" or that they wanted to build "networks" (p. 2).

Regardless of how graduate students define community differently from undergraduate students, their desire for community is documented in the limited literature on graduate student retention. Gordon (2016) found that graduate students felt they could benefit from social events that were not just for students within their program, but that included students from across graduate programs. One participant stated that social events that went beyond just their program would show "that there are things out there besides what's in your cohort and bringing that community aspect further" (p. 96). I would argue that this sentiment reinforces the essential elements of community that Moore lists. Graduate work can be isolating, and students need to know how their efforts and work fit into the bigger picture by seeing what others are doing.

Another form of social support comes from mentors. Mentors can be sourced from graduate peers (from either within or outside of the program), alumni, or faculty members. Mentors can help alleviate the isolation that some graduate students experience. They can be sounding boards for how others may have handled situations. If external to the program, mentors can provide an outside perspective to the small world of the program. Mokhtarian (2013) reports that graduate students who had a mentor relationship are more likely to be more active as alumni; as stated earlier, active alumni are invaluable resources to a program.

The third way schools can improve graduate student retention is by acting in ways that show the program and university understand the unique needs of graduate students. For example, graduate students voice the need for flexibility. Greenberg (2014) asked faculty ways that they accommodate graduate students without jeopardizing the academic integrity of the coursework or program. Faculty responded that they offered office hours via email or in person, were flexible with times to meet, and showed leniency in deadlines. When faculty and administrators show the willingness to be flexible, graduate students feel like they have a better chance to meet the challenges of graduate school. Universities may also consider offering childcare to support students with families (Gordon 2016).

A fourth way that institutions and programs can aid graduate student retention efforts is by recognizing and supporting graduate student achievements. These types of activities can help show the institution’s commitment to graduate programs and bring more awareness of the contributions of graduate programs at the university level. This recognition should be distinct from recognition of the rest of the campus community. Mokhtarian (2013) suggests featuring accomplishments on the school's website, having a featured section for graduate successes in the school's alumni magazine, and establishing separate awards programs for graduate students and graduate faculty.

The fifth way institutions can improve graduate student retention is to give them a voice when it comes to their experience and the program. For example, some graduate students who Gordon (2016) interviewed voiced a desire for some form of graduate student organization, that again, went beyond the program level. They felt that this would give students more voice in graduate affairs. Graduate students want to have a say in what affects them. When they have that opportunity to give their feedback, they are more engaged in their program and in their success. The key to making their feedback have a positive impact on retention, both short-term and long-term, is closing the feedback loop, as discussed in the later section about successful assessment. If decisions and actions based on graduate student feedback is communicated in ways that are visible to current graduate students, they will have an awareness that the institution or program places value on them and on the graduate program. Additionally, students who are more satisfied while in the program are more likely to be satisfied and engaged alumni. If the information is also communicated to alumni, the cycle of engagement continues. Satisfied alumni are more likely to engage in activities that support graduate student retention, such as donating funds to the program, acting as mentors, and providing job opportunities and placements (Delaney 2004).

The five activities presented in this section that can help to improve graduate student retention require that institutions perform ongoing assessment activities. More specifically, institutions need to conduct assessment, including surveys, to get the feedback of their graduate students. Next, we will turn to the literature that looks at assessment, both why it is done and how it can be done.

THE WHY: ASSESSMENT THEORY

Introduction

In reviewing the literature for this study, I began by focusing on the following topics within the field of sociology: graduate student exit and alumni survey practices used by other education institutions, survey techniques, and graduate student recruitment and retention. The sociology sources led me to sources in other fields of study. In all fields, I found that the majority of the literature focuses on institutions using surveys to understand the experiences of undergraduate students. Despite the focus on undergraduate experiences, much of the information is transferable to graduate students and conducting surveys in general. These writings, in combination with literature that *is* specifically around graduate students' experiences, provide substantial resources to inform the creation and implementation of effective and sustainable exit and alumni surveys.

My research revealed two main categories of literature of interest for this study. The first and largest category is literature around what I think of as higher education assessment "theory." In researching surveys that had been conducted, the literature usually led back to the reason, or "why," to conduct surveys in the first place, and how surveys fit into the bigger picture of assessment. This category of literature addresses the history of assessment, the general idea of what is assessment, why there is resistance to assessment, the reasons to do assessment, and what successful assessment looks like. A large part of the "why" is dedicated to undergraduate student retention, with a smaller portion focusing on graduate student retention. The second category of literature is around the "how" of the survey process. These pieces examine the actual mechanics of university survey processes, from the design and development of surveys, the pros and cons to different methods of administering surveys, to ways to increase response rates. I begin my review with a consideration of the literature that focuses on higher education assessment "theory."

Why the Focus on Assessment?

Measuring college student success has been something that universities and colleges have been attempting for decades. While some of the research that was done in the 1970's may still contain concepts and goals that are applicable today, the landscape of higher education has changed, and continues to change, drastically. The changes are driven by technological usage, demographics of students and faculty, and political and economic challenges to education. With changes like these, what universities and colleges want to measure, and why, also change. The most readily accessible and abundant literature falls into the category of higher education assessment "theory." This literature addresses the topic of assessment in general, such as the past and current state of assessment, how student feedback works as one method of assessment, why assessment needs to be done, and why there is often resistance to assessment. This category is one of the more persistent in its relevance to the topic over the years, as these are the foundational ideas on which the world of assessment and surveys is built.

In the early 1980's, there was a demand for assessment of higher education institutions as stories went public about students graduating from college without being able to read or perform basic math skills. As conflict grew over increasing costs of higher education and competing requests for public funding for other social services, the public wanted to see evidence of the outcomes and benefits of attending college. A common reaction to concerns about the quality of education was to automatically blame schools and faculty for poor student performance, rather than looking at the issue as one that also involves families, the economy, and political forces. As a result, accrediting agencies, academic foundations, and disciplinary associations became involved in the demand for assessment and accountability. State legislatures mandated that colleges and universities assess their programs. The U.S. Department of Education required regional accrediting organizations to assess student learning outcomes as a condition of accreditation (Senter 2001; Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2009; Spalter-Roth, Kisielewski, and Van Vooren 2016; Weiss, Cosbey, Habel, Hanson, and Larsen 2002).

Senter (2001) links the institutionalization of assessment to other trends in higher education. One trend is the general effort to refocus faculty attention to the student, as attention may have been directed, by administration, towards individual research and publication. The idea here is that the importance and focus of assessment is not on the faculty perse but rather on the student and student-learning. Another trend Senter notes is that we are in the throes of the information age. The growth of the field of assessment is tied to the fact that we have easier access to people, communication, and subsequently, ample data that can be used to understand and improve student learning. Another trend, which is not necessarily welcomed by all, is the trend to run higher education more like a business. In this business model, the students are the customers, the faculty are the workers, and student learning is the product. Senter explains that this last trend especially appeals to those who are most concerned with rising higher education costs and higher accountability for universities to improve student performance.

Resistance to Assessment

While there has been a significant push to assessment in higher education, there has also been understandable faculty resistance to this mandate. Often, the way the need for assessment is communicated to faculty doesn't make it clear that it's about improving student learning. Instead, it can feel to faculty like a top-down requirement set by administrators who are reacting to external mandates. This mandate creates an "extra hoop" which must be jumped through in order to get back to the "real work" of teaching and research. Clark and Filinson (2011) describe the reaction of their Sociology department at Rhode Island College as "kicking and screaming" against the external mandate for assessment. Their department's assessment journey revealed the tension and suspicion that can exist between administration and faculty. The perception of the faculty was that "the entire process of assessment was questioning the validity of our grades and therefore undermining our competence as professional assessors" (p. 128). In addition, the mandate was a reminder to their faculty that their profession as academics could be de-professionalized, "rendering it more equivalent to a blue-collar one in which managers rather than autonomous professionals control the workplace" (p. 127).

In 2008, the American Sociological Association conducted a survey in which they asked department chairs their opinions about assessment. The survey found that Chairs viewed assessment as yet another required activity that they were not given extra resources or time to do. In addition, whatever information they may find from the exercise would not necessarily result in their department receiving any additional resources to make the changes that the assessment indicated they should make (Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2016). One department chair responded to this frustration:

> We are inundated by initiatives from the administration, faculty bodies, accrediting agencies, the Commission on Higher Education, and state governments. We spend an ever-increasing portion of our time and energy responding, accommodating, and resisting. This does not lead to any measurable improvement in anything we do. It does harm morale. (P. 3)

Chin, Senter, and Spalter-Roth (2011) cite another Chair's response from the survey conducted by Spalter-Roth and Scelza (2016) as an example not only of the time concerns, but also of the mistrust by faculty:

> Much of it is left to the department, but no resources or release are being provided to assist with the time demands. And many faculty aren't convinced of the need or benefit of doing this given the time and resources required. We think it will ultimately result in less time for course preparation, scholarship, and service. We see it as job intensification for the purposes of bureaucratic reporting. It is a loss of professional trust. (P. 122)

This concern that assessment is being "dumped" on faculty who are already overworked was also reported by Hohm and Johnson (2001) who facilitated a workshop on assessment for sociology faculty of the California State University (CSU) system in 1998. At the workshop, the faculty expressed that their teaching and results would suffer as a result of the extra burden of assessment activities with no additional time or resources to do them. Hohm and Johnson also found that the amount of support provided by different campuses for assessment activities varied quite a bit, with some providing a lot of support, and others providing very little.

Another concern expressed at the workshop revolved around the fear that the information gathered from assessment, although intended to improve student learning, could be used against the department or faculty by administration. Assessment language can be found in CSU planning documents, which adds to fears that assessment data could be used for program elimination during times of dwindling budgets.

Faculty also expressed concern that departments may not be able to customize assessment activities to their specific needs. The faculty at the workshop were against standardized forms of assessment, stating that “cookie-cutter” approaches do not take into account the uniqueness of different departments within the CSU system.

Weiss, Cosbey, Habel, Hanson, and Larsen (2002) postulate that some of these fears and resistance to assessment by faculty are the result of assessment being done poorly and without thinking through the process and meaning of assessment first. Angelo (1999), as quoted in Weiss et al. (2002), says that “most assessment efforts have resulted in little learning improvement because they have been implemented without a clear vision of what ‘higher’ or ‘deeper’ learning is and without an understanding of how assessment can promote such learning” (p. 68). This lack of understanding happens when administration demands quick action be taken based on assessment data. The result is assessment occurring in a “piecemeal fashion” that faculty perceive as meaningless.

Knowing that assessment is indeed work, and is usually imposed from above, how then, can assessment be a meaningful exercise for faculty? Why should assessment be done? Much of the literature of assessment theory discusses the deeper "why" behind assessment and how it fits into the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Assessment: A Responsibility to Student Learning

There is the overarching idea in the literature that universities have an obligation to understand how their teaching is affecting the success of their students through assessment. In their research about master's student retention, Gordon (2016) speaks of this obligation as a "moral responsibility to ensure the highest level quality of teaching and support to all students" (p. 35). When students are recruited to attend a university, they are told of all the benefits of choosing to pursue their degree at that institution. Part of that benefit is the investment in their own lifelong growth and potential for enhanced careers. Delaney (1997) states that it is the ethical responsibility of the academic institution to measure if it is fulfilling these promises and if students perceive that their expectations have been met.

Even as this responsibility to meet student educational needs is acknowledged, the top down requirement to assess still remains, complete with all the challenges and tensions that go with it. Senter (2001) gives a realistic picture stating that the institutionalization of assessment means it is not a fad that will go away and faculty will not be able to outlive assessment requirements. If assessment is a process that is here to stay, then it is to the benefit of faculty to embrace it and move forward. Faculty have the choice to take control of the process themselves and design assessment to be a worthwhile exercise that can benefit them, rather than allow it to be controlled by others who may use it for administrative control. For assessment to be a meaningful exercise in which faculty can find benefits, they must be given the opportunity to understand the role that assessment has in the scholarship of teaching and learning as well as what constitutes the best assessment.

Weiss, Cosbey, Habel, Hanson, and Larsen (2002) draw on McKinney (2000) to provide a definition of the scholarship of teaching and learning as the systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public, seeking to promote the research that faculty members conduct on their daily activities. Assessment fits into this reflective practice by providing the information used to improve teaching and learning. Hohm and Johnson (2001) offer this definition of assessment:

> Assessment is the direct or indirect information about student performance and development to produce evidence that would be useful in understanding how well students are meeting goals and objectives set by departments in which they are enrolled...It is an ongoing activity; it serves to enhance the department's mission; it is dynamic (it is circular with a feedback loop) in that it is changing (goals and objectives, indicators, etc.); it is long term; and it is cognitive and affective. (P. 51-52)

One key aspect of effective assessment is that it is a systematic and continuous process of investigation and improvement designed to achieve the department or program goals. Another aspect of effective assessment is that it is a conscientious process undertaken by faculty.

The literature identifies four main reasons/goals for conscientious assessment: increased faculty dialogue about teaching and learning, improved teaching, changes in curriculum to meet changes in the field, and enhanced student learning (Weiss, Cosbey, Habel, Hanson, and Larsen 2002). The first goal is increased faculty dialogue. This is critically important and must happen first for anything else to occur successfully. Too often, departments, programs, and faculty function in silos, focused on their specific fields of research, and trying to meet the demands within their particular worlds. Conducting assessment in silos without dialogue results in obtaining meaningless data. Weiss et al. (2002) assert that:

> Conducting meaningful assessment requires faculty colleagues to engage in serious conversation about teaching and learning: about the mission of the department or program, about explicit goals and objectives held for students, about ways to determine the best manner to assess the extent to which students are achieving the objectives, and about ways that department organization, curriculum, and course instruction can be modified to enhance student learning. While many departments never engage in this type of discussion, proponents of assessment argue that they should and that the teaching-learning process will inevitably benefit. (P. 65)

These types of self-reflective activities lead to the remaining reasons to conduct conscientious assessment. Dialogue about teaching and learning leads to improved teaching when faculty must think about their courses and the way they deliver them. Together, faculty must then discuss how their courses fit together to achieve the best formula for student learning. Curricular changes can be made when programs can see what is, and what is not working for students, as well as what changes they need to make to respond to the changing world of work.

These types of dialogues can result in what is the arguably the most important reason to engage in this type of effort: improved student learning. Instead of focusing on input and teaching-oriented education, the shift is moving towards outcome-based, learning-oriented education. “The measure of success shifts from what is being given to students or done to or for students to what happens to students as a result of their educational experience. Those who work in assessment agree that this is a profound change” (Weiss et al. 2002:66).

Assessment provides a systematic way for departments or programs to collect the information they need to have these discussions. In the traditionally individualistic world of academia, the type of collaboration that Weiss et al. describe requires stepping out of the habitual ways of functioning in silos to being more willing to coordinate together with the student in mind first and foremost. With the willingness to collaborate, faculty must then take the steps necessary to make assessment a successful endeavor. The specifics of what makes assessment successful is discussed in the next chapter. At this point, we turn to a consideration of using surveys within the assessment process.

What Can Be Gained From Conducting Surveys As Part of Assessment?

Some of the most immediate uses of assessment findings are to provide information to help make decisions about curriculum changes, course content, and teaching methods, with the ultimate goal being enhanced student learning. One method of assessment that institutions are leveraging are surveys, including surveys of new students, alumni, and employers. Departments and programs may use survey data and findings to meet accreditation requirements, lobby for more faculty or resources, gather contact information for networking, and inform recruiting and retention efforts. From alumni surveys in particular, the information is also used for detecting emerging trends in the field, building alumni community, sourcing mentors and placements, and soliciting donations.

One type of survey that is mentioned as a tool but is not used frequently, is the employer survey. Programs and departments can find it helpful to ask employers in their field what types of skills they would deem important for graduates to have to be viable candidates for hire. It is also a method to reach out and create partnerships in the community that could serve as possible internship placement sites for students. Although they can be useful, employer surveys are not always the most effective for the time spent, as they require a significant time investment. In a survey of sociology departments in the United States, Spalter-Roth, Kisielewski, and Van Vooren (2013) reported that there was a steep decline in usage of employer surveys from 8.4 percent in the 2000/2001 academic year (AY) to 6.7 percent in the 2011/2012 AY. The literature that I found where employer surveys and outreach were discussed most often were in specialized professional fields such as public affairs administrators, service providers, and healthcare providers (Edgar and Hyde 2005; Jacobs and Koehn 2004; Jennings 1989). For example, a school of nursing included employers as key stakeholders during the design of their curriculum evaluation and surveys. The survey asked employers to evaluate their graduates and give suggestions on program improvement. In addition to an employer survey, they host an annual breakfast for employers of graduates, potential employers, and agency representatives. This breakfast provides opportunities for face-to-face feedback and networking that they have found invaluable (Jacobs and Koehn 2004).

However, as I indicated above, these surveys are rarely used; instead most surveys are given to students.

The literature shows that there are many different types of surveys that are given to students. One of these, which is the least common type of survey, is an "entrance" survey. Entrance surveys can provide the unique picture of a student at the beginning point in their academic career. When used, entrance surveys are used as part of a holistic approach in conjunction with exit and/or alumni surveys to gain a fuller picture of the student over the life of their educational career and after. This type of long-term approach to improving student learning and the impacts of a program or department contributes to successful assessment. Depending on what the goals are of the department or program, entrance surveys are used to understand who is choosing to enter their program and why, or to gauge a beginning point of a student's understanding of the field of study (Hood, Potts, and Johnson 2001; Powers, Fernandez, and Nichols 2001). When entrance surveys are discussed in the literature, they are usually for undergraduate students. I did not find any references to entrance surveys for graduate students in the literature.

An example of how entrance surveys can benefit an institution is provided by the Rhode Island College Sociology department (Clark and Filinson 2011). They have used undergraduate student entrance surveys for retention purposes. They want to understand what drew a student to the major, the student's expectations of the major, and if there were any factors in their recruitment and retention the department could improve. They have uncovered that there was a great discrepancy in what students' expectations were compared to the actual program structure and goals. Students assumed the program was aligned with their own career goals, which was not always true. Students had frequently not seen an advisor when they took the survey; meeting an advisor may have alleviated some of the mismatched expectations. They also found that student enrollment in introductory courses declined when not taught by full-time faculty, so they increased full-time faculty assignment to those courses. They also became aware of the financial and work commitments of their new majors, which could contribute to difficulties completing the major.

> Although in no way a substitute for formative assessment, entering student surveys did provide us with valuable insights related to our teaching endeavors and the structure of our program and introduced the voice of our (prospective) consumers...In tracking these findings over the past five years, we as a department have been able to pinpoint the issues we need to address to enhance the prospects of success for our students...The entering student survey may have led to more department-wide changes in approach to our students than the evaluation of senior seminar papers….The entering student survey, in contrast, raised much broader issues of how students enter our major and what may prevent them from completing it…(P. 134)

At the end of a student's career, exit surveys provide the department or program with the perceptions of the student as they are getting ready to graduate. If entrance surveys are also being used by an institution, the comparison of the two points in time can shed new light on ways that a program or department can improve. Some schools utilize exit interviews instead of surveys, depending on the time and people resources they have available. Exit surveys are more commonly used than entrance surveys, and again, are more typically discussed in the literature in relation to undergraduate students, not graduate students. Additionally, the majority of literature discussing exit interviews or surveys was in relation to students successfully graduating from a program, and did not include students leaving a program before graduating. Some schools have used multiple surveys to best understand their students.

An example of how one program leveraged learnings from multiple types of surveys as part of their comprehensive assessment strategy is the California State University Sacramento Sociology department (Dorn 2001). New majors complete an entrance survey given to them at orientation or their first advising appointment. With the entrance survey, the department hopes to gain a collective picture of their cohorts of new majors. The survey asks information such as students' educational history, family background, why they chose the sociology major, and their future goals. At the other end of their education, graduating seniors are given an exit survey, during class, after they have turned in their signed graduation contract. As this is an annual event the department gains data from different cohorts that they can compare regarding students' perceptions of their experience in the program and the extent to which they learned the program goals and achieved learning outcomes. Finally, a standardized alumni survey is sent out every five years by the university Office of Institutional Research to which the Sociology department is able to add unique questions for their sociology alumni. By using questions specific to the sociology alumni, the program is able to ask some similar questions to those on either the entrance or exit survey so they can compare the changes in student perspectives over time.

The Specific Benefits of Alumni Surveys

Alumni surveys can provide institutions with some of the richest information about their programs, as former graduates have a different perspective on how well the knowledge and skills they gained in their program have translated to the skills they need in their jobs (Delaney 2004). They also have the benefit of time to digest their experiences and can reflect in a different way now that the storm of graduation and transitioning from school is over. Alumni surveys are some of the most commonly used among institutions and also the most frequently discussed topics in the literature. Pace (1979) documented alumni studies dating back to the 1930's and discussed how alumni research can be used to assess the impact an institution can have on its students. Since then, the focus on the value of alumni research as part of a comprehensive assessment plan has only increased.

Delaney (2004) argues that the case has been made that alumni play a key role in higher education assessment. It appears that many colleges and universities agree. In a survey of sociology departments across the United States, the American Sociology Association reported the most widely used methods of assessment to be: first, senior theses and projects, second, exit surveys, and third, alumni surveys, with 41.4 percent of departments using them (Spalter-Roth, Kisielewski, and Van Vooren 2013). Delaney (2004) cites McGuire and Casey (1999), who propose that since "college education is an investment whose dividends accrue for many years after graduation, it is appropriate to use alumni research as a way of evaluating the investment" (p. 92).

While institutions commonly use alumni surveys for accreditation and to inform decisions about the academic program and curriculum, course content, and teaching effectiveness, they can also use the information to gain insight on job trends, provide guidance around the quality of student services, increase retention and recruitment, solicit donations, create networking and community connections, and support marketing and public relations efforts.

An example of how one university has benefited from undergraduate alumni surveys is Ohio University (Moden and Williford 1988). Their business graduates reported that they wished they had more career development support. In response, the college developed the Executives on Campus Program, where business people mentor undergraduates and visit the college. Ohio University has also used alumni surveys to gather information to use in their recruiting efforts. By understanding what the trajectories of their graduates look like, they are able to share success stories of individual alumni and provide prospective students and parents with possible career paths and salaries in different fields. They have also been able to leverage the findings of their alumni surveys to garner financial awards for four of their programs from the Ohio state legislature.

Alumni surveys are a powerful tool to not only gather information about past experiences, but also to create connections upon which to build networks. They give schools the opportunity to reach out and gain valuable human resources to support the school and generations of students. Powers, Fernandez, and Nichols (2001) state that their sociology alumni of Santa Clara University are highly engaged with the department, giving career talks and offering internship placements for current students. They add that “the potential for active alumnae/alumni involvement in a program should not be underestimated" (p. 41). Engaged alumni are a reflection of satisfied alumni, and the value of satisfied alumni cannot be ignored. Satisfied alumni are more likely to donate to their alma mater, recommend the school to new recruits, provide jobs to graduates, and volunteer their time and expertise to their departments (Delaney 2004).

Satisfied alumni were usually satisfied students when they were enrolled. How can institutions improve student satisfaction? A long-term systematic assessment plan is an important way to gain insight into student experiences to increase student satisfaction. Next, we will turn to the literature that explains how to develop successful assessment, the mechanics of the survey process, and what different institutions have learned from conducting their own surveys.

THE HOW: PART ONE - WHAT MAKES ASSESSMENT SUCCESSFUL?

For the purposes of this study, I focused on literature around exit surveys and alumni surveys. While I was able to find some literature around alumni surveys for graduate students, most of the exit survey literature addresses primarily undergraduate students; however, this information is still useful when thinking about how to conduct exit surveys for graduate students.

According to research conducted by the American Sociological Association on assessment by sociology undergraduate programs, 55.4 percent of departments reported using exit surveys for graduating seniors, and 41.4 percent were using alumni surveys during the 2011/2012 academic year. Following the use of senior theses and projects to assess student competencies and program success, these methods were the second and third most widely used forms of assessment by the programs surveyed (Spalter-Roth, Kisielewski, and Van Vooren 2013). If these results on survey usage for sociology programs are any indication of trends in other fields of study, then it is apparent that institutions and programs realize the value of surveys to gather feedback from which they can learn. The ways to create successful assessment, including the actual mechanics of implementing an effective survey that will obtain useful information, are explored in abundance in the literature.

The advice for successful assessment follows some general guidelines: full institutional support and resources must be provided to sustain assessment activities; assessment must be approached from a holistic perspective which solicits collaboration from all key stakeholders; a long-term and comprehensive plan must be constructed before implementation, including actions for "closing the loop."

First, in order for assessment activities to be successful, there must be full support from the institution and department. Senter (2001) explains that one of the common fallacies of assessment is that the activities are a natural extension of faculty workloads. As reported in the literature, the time required for assessment activities and how that affects their other responsibilities is a key point of resistance by faculty to assessment. Assessment is indeed work and cannot be just added onto existing work if assessment is to result in a quality product. Examples of faculty compensation include release time, summer compensation, and including time spent on assessment-related work as teaching or service. Assessment is not free of costs. Financial support for the work may need to come from outside the department budget (Pederson and White 2011). Regardless of where the budget comes from, these factors need to be discussed before the task of assessment is undertaken. This leads to another key piece of advice to make assessment efforts successful.

One of the most important keys to successful assessment is putting together a long-term and comprehensive plan before beginning to collect data. This step will take time that the department or institution may object to as they focus on meeting mandates for immediate results. Williford and Moden (1989) share that developing their assessment plan at Ohio University took one year. That full year was crucial in putting together a systematic and ongoing program of assessment since assessment is not just the gathering and analysis of data. Those are only parts of assessment and should not be mistaken for a commitment to assessment. The assessment process must be seen as a multi-year endeavor to be reviewed and revisited before the next cycle of gathering data begins (Senter 2001).

The first step to creating a plan is agreeing upon the goals of the department, including student-learning goals. In sharing what they learned from their assessment work at Santa Clara University, Powers, Fernandez, and Nichols (2001) warn:

> The single most important (and never ending) part of the organizational improvement process is to try to do a better job of framing organizational objectives by articulating a more compelling vision defined by a limited and achievable set of goals. Unless this is done before systematic data collections starts, there is an appreciable risk that program assessment can actually do harm by diverting energy and attention away from things which should matter most, in favor of less important things which people have more experience in counting. (P. 35)

Another important aspect of a long-term plan for successful assessment is that the work and processes of assessment are embedded within the existing institutional structures, such as tenure and promotion systems, so faculty are both supported and rewarded for the work. Additionally, assessment activities should be linked to structures in place for approving curriculum changes (Pedersen and White 2011; Senter 2001). Senter states another fallacy of assessment is that assessment activities are self-sustaining once they have been established. If an institution has a long-term commitment to successful assessment, they must make it an institutional priority. It cannot be expected to just happen; the institution must create an environment where energy and time remains devoted to assessment as a separate priority.

For a long-term plan to be accepted and workable for the institution, it has to be created collaboratively, with input and cooperation from all key stakeholders. This aspect of collaboration is heavily emphasized in the literature for a variety of reasons. One basic reason is that by collaborating, faculty and staff learn from others and see what is working and what is not. Another reason is to make sure that the different audiences of the information are considered before work begins. Knowing who the audiences will be and the different ways they want to digest the information will change the data to be gathered and the way the information needs to be presented (Delaney 1997; Williford and Moden 1989). For example, academic programs will be looking for different things in the data than the board of trustees.

O'Brien, Riedman, Doraz, and Payne (2001) of CSU Stanislaus argue that a key stakeholder voice that is often neglected is that of the student. In their research to understand what assessment means to students, O'Brien et al. found that students were very aware of assessment in terms of "tracking academic success." They also found that students had a very passionate level of interest in assessment issues, especially in how student post-graduation "success" is operationalized. Their perceptions of their "success" did not necessarily match up with how higher education defined it. If a "bottom-up" approach to assessment is seen as successful, which includes faculty as critical in assessment planning, then student voices should be part of that process.

Finally, when all key stakeholders have a voice in the development, design, and sustainment of the assessment plan, there is a better chance that they will be engaged and supportive through the life of the process. Powers, Fernandez, and Nichols (2001) describe the importance of having engaged people working together:

> A great program needs faculty working toward a common purpose and that communicates their common purpose to students. One or more people at cross-purposes with collectively agreed upon programmatic goals have corrosive consequences. Trying to find common ground and asking everyone to support that common ground is important. (P. 42)

Another guideline that is offered in the literature is that the assessment plan needs to be comprehensive in nature. Assessment is more successful when it is approached with a holistic perspective by institutions, creating a full picture of student learning through multiple methods. While my study is focusing on exit and alumni surveys, surveys are only one method of assessment. Pedersen and White (2011) state that the most comprehensive assessment plan would include methods of indirect assessment, direct assessment, and applied assessment. Direct assessment requires a measure of student learning such as a thesis or portfolio, while indirect assessment relies on student perceptions through self-reports, such as a survey given to students enrolled in a program. Alumni surveys or interviews which are used as a follow up to the university experience fall into the category of applied assessment. Surveys are only one part of what needs to be an ongoing, cyclical process of monitoring, review, benchmarking and improvement. A comprehensive plan provides a "solid base on which the university might develop an overarching framework for evaluation of learning and teaching" (Alderman, Towers, and Bannah 2012:273).

Going further, a holistic approach may include assessment through the entire life of the student relationship, from admission, through enrollment, at exit, and finally post-graduation as alumni. For example, Santa Clara University has undergraduates take an entrance survey when they declare their major. In addition, the sociology program gives a survey to undergraduate students who first enroll in their Principles of Sociology course to gain a basic feel for how they use the "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959). This enables the faculty to see how their understanding of this concept and application to the world around them changes during their educational career. The students take various exams, submit research papers, and complete internships as part of the program. Graduating seniors complete an exit survey when they request their graduation petition to be signed. The exit survey is similar to the entrance survey, and has additional questions asking how they may want to use their training, if they feel prepared to do so, and if they have any suggestions for the program. Finally, the sociology department follows-up with their alumni with periodic surveys about the ways they have been using their training in their lives (Powers, Fernandez, and Nichols 2001).

The last piece of advice for successful assessment is "closing the loop." This step is one of the most important to long-term improvement of student learning, but is often the one most commonly skipped. The value of assessment is not the data gathered, which is all too often the focus of assessment activities. The findings need to be "seen as a *means* to an end rather than as *ends* in and of themselves" (Hood, Potts, and Johnson 2001:75). Weiss, Cosbey, Habel, Hanson, and Larsen (2002) assert that assessment "becomes real" when the faculty compare the results of the analysis to the expectations and then identify and implement actions to enhance student learning. This is the ultimate purpose of assessment, and accomplishes what the process is supposed to accomplish.

The value of assessment data comes from the conversation that occurs and the feedback loops that communicate the findings and actions that have been taken (or not taken) as a result of the findings (Senter 2001).

In the specific case of surveys as a tool of assessment, closing the loop is a crucial step. This importance is explained by Alderman, Towers, and Bannah (2012) who conducted a literature review of student feedback systems being used throughout Australian universities. Their research revealed that although surveys were valuable assessment tools, the majority of institutions were not using the findings to change or improve the student learning experience. Alderman et al. draw on Harvey (2011) to argue for the importance of ensuring that there are appropriate action plans in place for feedback to be used for improvement purposes and that sustaining change is more important than collecting the feedback. There has to be a plan in place to link the feedback *from* the students and the feedback *to* the students. This process has to be cyclical beginning with the students' feedback, then moving to the communication back to them about changes planned as a result of their feedback. This must happen before the cycle begins again. They also report that if the institution takes the step of closing the loop, student satisfaction increases over time and students are more likely to remain engaged in the feedback process.

We have seen how the literature reinforces the importance of planning and strategy with key stakeholders for assessment to be successful. This applies also to the specific use of surveys as assessment tools. Next we will take a look at how the literature addresses the importance of the survey process itself and how it can help support successful assessment if done well.

THE HOW: PART TWO - THE SURVEY PROCESS

Designing the Survey

The first phase of implementing either an exit or an alumni survey is the design. The design phase includes both the planning and strategy for implementation, as well as the actual design of the survey instrument. As discussed in the section about successful assessment, first the goals of the survey must be agreed upon prior to the design of the instrument. The importance of coming up with common definitions and understandings of the student learning experience and how to measure and evaluate these experiences cannot be emphasized enough. Too often, survey activities begin with designing the questionnaire, when it really should begin with exploring the purpose of the student feedback (Alderman 2012). Additionally, the following topics must be addressed and put into writing: a plan for roles and responsibilities, how the results of the surveys will be communicated and acted upon, and how the process will be sustained and continued (including where the budget and resources will come from).

This first step of exploring the goals of the survey and planning out a long-term survey strategy requires the program or institution to engage all key stakeholders in the process. As discussed in the section on successful assessment, for a long-term plan to be accepted and workable for the institution, it has to be created collaboratively, with input and cooperation from all key stakeholders. For example, when Santa Clara University created their plan, they consulted with students, parents, alumni, administrators, outside colleagues, internship site supervisors, and employers (Powers, Fernandez, and Nichols

2001). These key stakeholders should also be consulted for feedback on the survey layout and questions as well.

A long-term plan needs to consider whether or not surveys will be managed and/or administered centrally by the institution or individually by departments or programs. While most of the literature describes surveys produced by individual departments or programs, there are arguments presented in support of surveys being centralized (Hardré and Hackett 2015; Williford and Moden 1989). One benefit of centralization is efficiency since multiple separate surveys for individual departments require more time and resources at many levels. Centralization can lend itself to shared costs and time for administration and analysis, as well as for maintaining and sustaining the process long-term. Additionally, findings across departments can be synthesized to analyze trends in alumni outcomes year after year and better inform graduate studies at the institution level. When each department or program comes up with and uses their own individual surveys, comparisons across programs cannot be made (Hardré and Hackett 2015). In addition, I would argue that centralizing the process and involving stakeholders across programs may also encourage sharing and learning between graduate programs and departments.

After goals, outcomes, and the long-term strategy have been agreed upon, the next phase is the actual design of the survey instrument. As stated previously, it is crucial that the design of the instrument, including the questions, not be a top-down mandate dictated by administration. Faculty from the all colleges or graduate programs must have input.

Questions should be reviewed by all key stakeholders, and adjusted based on their feedback.

Key stakeholder engagement and input are crucial especially when an exit survey or alumni survey is administered and managed centrally by the institution. If the needs of individual colleges or programs are not being met with a general survey, the risk is that they will conduct their own individual surveys separately. This could result in a poor alumni experience as they may receive multiple repetitive alumni surveys coming from different campus offices. The resulting perception that the "right hand isn't talking to the left hand" could also be a reputational risk for the institution and program. One way the needs of individual colleges or programs can still be met with a centralized survey model is to provide them with space on the general survey for college or program-specific questions (Alderman 2012; Williford and Moden 1989). When Ohio University built their alumni survey, they found this was important to gain support from the colleges since they lost their source of program-specific feedback. The general survey was well-received because it was more efficient and colleges' specific needs could still be addressed (Williford and Moden 1989).

Ultimately, when both the plan and the format of a survey are being designed, the goal is to create a process and instrument that will invite the most responses possible. The majority of the literature around the survey process addresses all the factors at each phase of the survey process that affect response rates.

During the phase of writing the questions for a survey, there are many differing recommendations in the literature for ways to write questions to increase response rates, while gaining the most pertinent information at the same time. Topics include the effectiveness of open-ended and closed-ended questions or the most reflective Likert scale. Burton (2001) chose to use all open-ended questions for the alumni survey created for the San Jose State University Industrial/Organizational Psychology program. The idea was that open-ended questions may help to avoid forcing a response and allow people to truly express themselves. Some of the literature recommends using a six-point or eight-point Likert scale, rather than the more commonly used five-point scale. With a six or eight-point scale, there is no option to "neither agree nor disagree." The respondent must choose some level of agreement or disagreement. (Alderman, Towers, and Bannah 2015; Hardré and Hackett 2015).

Two common recommendations to increase response rates for both exit and alumni surveys is to keep survey length brief and assure participants anonymity. However, depending on if the type of survey is an exit survey or an alumni survey, there are different challenges for each to gain maximum participation at a high quality level. We will explore some of these challenges and how they affect the administration of the surveys.

Administering the Survey

Institutions must determine what is the optimal timing to administer a survey to obtain the most participation. For exit surveys, the most common time for undergraduates is close to the end of students' careers and the students receiving the survey is cued by the completion of a step required for graduation. For example, Santa Clara University asks graduating seniors to complete the exit survey before they have their graduation petitions signed (Powers, Fernandez, and Nichols 2001). At California State University (CSU) Sacramento, graduating seniors are given the survey during one of their last classes (Dorn 2001). The example schools do not specify whether they “require” students to participate in the exit survey or not. For alumni surveys, it is recommended that the institution takes into consideration common busy or holiday times of year when deciding on the survey period (Nair, Adams, and Mertova 2008; Nulty 2008). Typically, alumni surveys are first given a year after graduation, then at repeated intervals, such as every five years.

For both alumni and exit surveys, the literature emphasizes the need for strong communication to make students and alumni very aware of the survey process, the value of their role in it, and what to expect. Schools having success with both exit and alumni surveys find that response rates improve with clear communication about the assessment process (and how surveys fit into that). Nulty (2008) recommends that colleges and departments involve faculty to spread the word about the survey to students, let students know the value and the purpose of the survey, and to provide verbal reminders about the assessment. Faculty endorsement of the survey adds validity and shows that the feedback system is not just an administrative function. Communication of the assessment and survey process should happen from the beginning of and throughout their academic career. For example, the CSU Sacramento Sociology department has a process that begins with a letter about assessment to each new major. The letter describes what assessment is, the goals of the university from assessment, and the student’s role in the process. With regards to surveys, the letter lets them know that they will completing an Entering Sociology Major Survey, a Graduating Senior Survey, and that they can expect to receive Alumni Surveys in the future in which their participation will be greatly appreciated (Dorn 2001). The idea is that with repeated discussion of assessment throughout a student's career, a student will be more engaged to participate later as alumni as well.

Exit surveys pose less of a challenge to obtain high response rates than alumni surveys because the students are still at the institution; there is no issue with trying to get a hold of them. However, for alumni surveys, the challenge which presents the most difficulty is obtaining valid contact information for alumni. Without accurate contact information, every other effort to increase response rates is a moot point.

Typically, colleges or departments pull together contact lists through any place they can find them. Survey administrators combine contacts from their own personal mailing lists with contact information they "mine" by reaching out to alumni offices, financial aid offices, other graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Some examples in the literature show that people go to very time and energy-consuming lengths to compile their contact lists before sending out the survey to have the best chance for participation. For example, Edgar and Hyde (2005) reached out to Emerson College and Tufts University graduate alumni via email informing them about the upcoming alumni feedback surveys, and requesting that the person reply back to the email to verify the contact information. In a follow-up email, they requested their assistance in locating the contact information for any other graduates. They repeated the process with each new confirmation. They also sent letters through the postal service to graduates who did not have an email address on record. By the end of the process, they had confirmed 119 of the 131 graduates of the program. While very effective, the process was also very labor and time-intensive. One could argue, however, that once the basic list is established and contact is made, conducting the survey would be easier in subsequent years.

Once the prior years' alumni information is established, universities can make an effort to improve the process for contacting future alumni, especially since their university email access usually does not persist, or the graduate uses an alternate email. In their alumni research for universities in the Western Cape, South Africa, duToit, Kraak, Favish, and Fletcher (2014) struggled to gather accurate contact information for their survey. They bemoan the difficulties in alumni research when universities do not keep accurate records.

> If universities wish to reach graduates in an increasingly digitalised era, be it for alumni or survey purposes, then they need to implement more reliable ways of verifying and updating details, especially private emails and mobile numbers, prior to students exiting their systems upon graduation. (P. 861)

Once the contact list is compiled, and pre-communication to alumni has possibly taken place, institutions administer their surveys via online instruments, through the postal mail, and/or over the phone. The literature contains advocates for and against each of these methods in terms of better response rates. If an institution has the resources, a combination of the methods can reach different alumni more effectively. This same discussion about the method of contact applies to follow-ups and reminders to the alumni to participate in the survey. In the end, it seems that for the alumni surveys discussed in the literature, no matter what the method used for initial administration and for reminders, the key was quality of contact information. In the alumni survey in Western Cape, duToit et al. (2014) intended to only send the survey out through email, as the majority of graduates were younger and part of the tech-savvy generations. However, when responses slowed down, the research team employed a call center to send two email reminders and to call graduates who did not have an email address. After only small increases in response rates, they tried sending a postal letter to graduates who had a postal address but no email or phone number.

The effectiveness of postal mail surveys as an effective way to increase response rates is debated in the literature. Much of the literature is outdated already, as the ways people communicate has changed exponentially over the years, and is continuing to change. Those who have used postal methods often follow some variation of the Dillman Total Design Method. Developed in 1978, the method proposes a sequence of scheduled mailings of letters or postcards, which may include replacement surveys, a return paid envelope, and certified mail insurance. If followed completely, this method would result in a considerable cost and is probably no longer valid if done alone in today's online environment. However, since the value of combined methods of administration is still recommended, the value of more "personal" methods compared to online methods must still be considered.

The importance of reminders in survey response rates is also debated in the literature. While some argue that frequent reminders to participate make all the difference

(Nair 2008; Nulty 2008), others show that after the first week of the survey period, the response rates are nominal despite the reminders (duToit et al. 2014). This also seems to vary with the method of reminders. Nair surveyed graduates who had not completed the survey afterward and found that personal contact by phone was an important factor to convince them to complete the survey. After personal contact, over half of the non-respondents were “persuaded” to finish the survey. However, unless an institution has the resources to conduct this type of in-depth phone contact, reminders are more likely to be electronic. With email, duToit et al. point out that there is no way to know if the participant is responding to the initial communication or the reminder, but since the cost of an email reminder is so low, any lift in response rates is better than none.

Another way to increase response rates during the administration phase is to offer incentives for completing the survey (Nair 2008; Nulty 2008). Nair reported that alumni who were contacted by phone to complete the survey often asked what they would get for doing the survey. Again, offering compensation for participation requires resources.

Closing the Loop

The final phase of the survey process is closing the loop. Closing the loop is crucial to the success of any assessment or survey plan. It is also one of the most challenging processes to define and measure, and requires dedicated and coordinated efforts over the long-term. In conducting exit surveys, Nair (2008) found that closing the loop helped to increase response rates.

> Students were more likely to participate in evaluation surveys if they felt their feedback made a meaningful contribution. This means that students not only felt

> that their voice was crucial in providing valuable information, but also that their feedback was acted upon by the institution. (P. 226)

Closing the loop must be done consistently for all steps of assessment and surveys administered throughout the educational career of a student. If this is done, it will also lead to more satisfied alumni who are more likely to participate to help current and future graduates,

> [Closing the loop] encourages participation in further research, as it demonstrates the value of individuals' responses and the importance of their participation; it increase confidence in the results and worth of the research if tangible action is evidenced; and it is ethical to de-brief respondents. (Watson 2003:145)

The converse is that if closing the loop does not happen, and students do not see any action or response to their feedback, they may become skeptical and less-engaged as students and alumni.

There are many options for presenting feedback to students, faculty, staff, and alumni. One medium is newsletters and posters generated by the institution overall, the college, or the department or program. Newsletters, posters, or flyers can either be paper and/or online. There are other ways to communicate and display feedback and results online to the community. Some universities have a designated section on their website that is active all year with ongoing actions based on feedback. Results may also be directly communicated in meetings and presentations (Watson 2008). I would argue that having the results available on the university website shows dedication and commitment to the process to the entire community, including prospective students and their families.

As we move into the next chapter, which is on graduate student surveys at Humboldt State University, I would like readers to keep in mind the main points from the literature review. Successful assessment, which includes surveys, can lead to engaged students and alumni. And assessment has a better chance of being successful when institutions approach the work in a thoughtful and holistic manner, involving all key stakeholders at all stages of the process. We also have taken a look at the unique needs of graduate students, and how successful assessment, including surveys, can contribute to graduate student retention. Of course, these are the ideal scenarios that allow successful assessment to happen. The reality of making all the pieces come together takes a long-term commitment by an institution. This begins with understanding the current state of one's institution, experience of students, and assessment. Now, we will look at the approach that I took to understand what is happening around graduate student surveys at Humboldt State University.

METHODS

My methods involved two separate workflows due to the bifurcated nature of my research. For both aspects of the research, I worked with the HSU Department of Sociology to understand the experiences and opinions of HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program students. The first set of methods was to create and pilot graduate student exit and alumni surveys and processes. The second set of methods was to gather information on the assessment practices of other graduate programs, both at HSU and also at other universities to help inform the creation of the Department of Sociology pilot surveys and processes. The learnings from my research were intended to be shared with the departments and the University to use in improving or coordinating retention and outreach efforts as a whole.

Humboldt State University Former Graduate Student Survey

Respondents

My study included former students who left the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program in 2016 and 2017 and students who were going to be leaving the program in May 2018. The survey was sent to students who participated in the program whether they graduated or not. A total of 33 people were invited to participate in the survey, nine of whom were members of the graduating class of May 2018. Eighteen people chose to respond to the survey for an overall response rate of 55 percent. One person responded to the email stating they were not interested in giving feedback and requesting not to be contacted further. Their name will added to a “do not solicit” list should surveys be conducted in the future.

Materials

The survey (Appendix A) I used was created by compiling questions used in other graduate student surveys. As the client, the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program wanted feedback about students’ experiences with the curriculum of the program, resources and support, issues of equity and inclusion, and preparation of skills needed for careers. The majority of the 2018 survey questions came from those used in the 2015 HSU Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey. First, I reviewed the 2015 survey instrument and results with my advisor and the Sociology Graduate Coordinator to learn what worked well and what didn’t from the 2015 survey. We then reworked the format and wording of the questions to make the survey as streamlined and clear as possible, and to elicit the most participation possible. We also compared the HSU Sociology Graduate Program survey with other surveys that had been used in the past by other programs and organizations, including the American Sociological Association 2005-2007 Bachelor’s and Beyond Surveys.

The same survey was used for both the former students who had already left the program in 2016 or 2017 (whether they graduated or not), and for students who were about to leave the program in May 2018. The reason an exit survey was not created separately from an alumni survey for the two different groups of people was mainly because the timing of the designing and planning of the survey did not allow for me to do so. Additionally, the questions the program wanted ask were essentially the same for both populations so that the program could see the difference of how people felt about their experiences at different points of time, from time of graduation to a couple years after graduation. We were able to write the survey questions so the wording would accommodate both populations of respondents.

The survey was built in Google Forms. No paper or telephone surveys were used. There were a total of 33 questions, eight of which were completely open-ended write-in questions. Several other questions that were not open-ended offered the option to add write-in comments as well. All the questions were optional; none were required to continue to the next question or section, with the exception of the informed consent question. Depending on the respondent, the flow of the questions could result in anywhere from 24 questions to the full 33 questions, and take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. We tested the survey flow by taking the survey ourselves, and adjusted it as needed.

One of the last questions of the survey asked the respondent if they were interested in future connections through the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program. The question also let them know that if they did want to provide their information to stay in contact, their information would be collected separately from their survey answers and could not be connected to the data in any way. If the respondent answered yes, they were automatically directed after the survey was completed to another link where they submitted their contact information. Four respondents chose to provide their contact information.

Procedures

The survey was sent to 33 people. Respondents were recruited in a series of four emails (Appendix B). The first email, which was sent May 8, 2018, launched the survey and invited them to participate. The remaining three emails served as reminder emails, and were sent on May 15, May 24, and June 4. For the first two emails, I constructed two versions, each with different greetings based on if the person was a former student or was soon to be graduating. The last two emails were identical since all recipients were then students who had exited the program. The emails of May 8 and 15 were sent from the Public Sociology email account of publicsoc@humboldt.edu, so the recipient would see the HSU department address as the sender. The emails of May 24 and June 4 were sent from my personal HSU email account of awh3@humboldt.edu, so recipients would see my name as the sender. The survey on Google Forms was closed to responses on June 8.

The respondents of the survey were required to provide their informed consent as part of the survey. The first question of the survey asked if the respondents consented or did not consent to participate in the study. If the respondent clicked that they did consent to participate, they were taken to the rest of the survey. If they clicked that they did not consent, they were redirected out of the survey, to a "thank you" page. The informed consent data will be in the response data in Google Forms for as long as that file exists.

The anonymity of the respondents was maintained at every step of the research process, using the following methods: No data was collected that could directly identify the respondents. In my reporting, I do not connect quotes to any demographic information that may make the identity of the respondent apparent. Data is presented in aggregate as much as needed to maintain the confidentiality of individual respondents.

The security of the survey information was protected by only giving access to the responses to the research team (Dr. Meredith Williams, the HSU Department of Sociology Graduate Coordinator, Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt, my graduate committee advisor, and myself). Access to the results are therefore password protected. All files are kept on Google Drive, accessible only to the research team. Data files will be kept for at least three years, to be able to establish longitudinal research as needed.

Analysis

The data collected from the survey was analyzed by hand coding and by using Excel cross tabs. The survey information was collated for presentation to the Sociology Master's Program Faculty.

Graduate Coordinator Interviews

Participants

I interviewed 15 Graduate Coordinators. If the graduate program had multiple concentrations, I interviewed either the overall Graduate Coordinator for the program or the Graduate Coordinator for the individual concentration, depending on their preference. Most concentrations are represented individually, while a few are not. All programs have representation with the exception of the Social Work program, from which I could not obtain an interview. Some Graduate Coordinators chose to be interviewed at the same time with another Graduate Coordinator from their program. I conducted two interviews for the Environment and Community program, one with the interim Graduate Coordinator and another with the sitting Graduate Coordinator when they returned from leave.

Table 2. Graduate Coordinator Interviews Conducted by Program

Program	Interview conducted
Applied Anthropology	Yes
Biology	Yes
Business Administration	Yes
Education	Yes
English	Yes
Environmental Systems:	
• Energy, Technology, and Policy	Yes
• Engineering	Yes
• Geology	No
Kinesiology	Yes
Natural Resources:	Yes
• Environmental Science and Management	No
• Fisheries	No
• Forest, Watershed, and Wildland Sciences	No
• Wildlife	No
Psychology:	
• Counseling (MFT)	Yes
• Academic Research	Yes
• School Psychology	No
Public Sociology	Yes
Social Science – Environment and Community	Yes
Social Work	No

Materials

I developed the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix C) in consultation with my advisor and the Sociology program Graduate Coordinator. As the client, the HSU Public Sociology graduate program was interested in exploring what other HSU graduate programs were doing to connect with, and evaluate the experiences of, former graduate students. The interview included questions about their department's outreach efforts to their former graduate students, including if they use (or have used) an exit survey. If they did use (or have used) an exit survey, I asked them about how their department executes the survey, to whom and when it is administered, and what types of information is their department seeking. If their department had not used an exit survey, I asked graduate coordinators about why not and what other types of outreach activities their department may use. Depending on the participant and the program, the flow of the questions could result in anywhere from 5 questions to 15 questions, and take approximately 30 to 90 minutes to complete.

Procedures

I recruited Graduate Coordinators mainly through email contact to request their participation in a one-on-one interview. I also followed up with departments and Graduate Coordinators by telephone or letter if I was experiencing difficulty getting in touch with someone. If they agreed to an interview, we scheduled the face-to-face, in-person interview to take place on campus. None of the interviews were conducted over the phone.

Before the interview began, the participants were required to provide their informed consent (Appendix D). I provided a paper copy of the consent form, and gave them time to read and sign the document. The informed consent forms are kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt. After three years, these consent forms will be shredded.

The Graduate Coordinators' information was not anonymous or confidential. This is because it is helpful for my research (and those who may want to use it) to be able to understand how specific departments and programs connect with their former graduate students. Therefore, the department identification remains with the interview, as the graduate coordinators are participating on behalf of their department. As a result, it may be possible to know the graduate coordinator's identity.

Interviews were recorded, and the recording was immediately transferred to a protected folder in Google Drive, accessible only to the research team. The transcripts of the interviews will be kept for three years, then the files will be deleted. Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt is the "owner" of all of the folders associated with the study, so she has the ability to change permissions as needed.

Analysis

To analyze the interviews, I hand-coded the interviews. Part of the hand-coding involved organizing each interview into themes, and then compiling all information from all interviews for each theme. I then read through the theme data again and re-coded as necessary.

Limitations of the research

The limitations of my research are bifurcated, as with the nature of the research itself. First, the graduate student survey is limited mainly by the small sample size of 33 people invited to participate in the survey. The small number made it difficult to generalize any results out to the larger population of Sociology graduate students over time. This is further complicated by respondents who may choose to opt-out of providing answers to particular questions or their demographic information. The current Sociology survey obtained a response rate of 51 percent with 18 respondents. While the feedback of those 18 respondents can provide valuable information, this still is not a large enough sample to generalize results. Another limitation is that this was the first time this exact survey was administered. Although there must be a beginning point for any work, it means that there is no other survey data that it can be compared to one-to-one. Lastly, the design of the survey itself was a limitation. Instead of designing and conducting both an exit survey and an alumni survey separately, I created them together as one survey which I sent out to both populations. The reason for this was because the Sociology Department had to decide on which type of survey they wanted to pilot, so the timing of my research did not allow for me to successfully create two surveys and get them out to both populations in a timely manner. In the end, the combination of the exit survey and the alumni survey was functional because we were able to word the questions to fit the appropriate respondent. However, it did make the survey longer in order to direct the respondent to the correct flow. In addition, some of the questions around job or career may not have been as salient for exiting graduate students. The other aspect of the survey design that may have been a limitation was presented by the restrictive nature of Google Forms as a survey platform. Because I used the free version of Google Forms, the functionality is less flexible. With a stronger survey platform, the survey could have been more streamlined, attractive, and user-friendly, which may have elicited more responses.

The limitations of the research of what other graduate programs are doing around exit and alumni surveys are primarily a result of the nature of the subject itself. The subject of graduate student assessment and retention is not widely studied or pursued, whether that be here at HSU, or out in the larger higher education community. While there is more literature around doctoral students and doctoral students of specific underrepresented groups, the majority of literature is focused on undergraduate assessment, surveys, and retention. This undergraduate focus applies to HSU as well. There are not a lot of activities around graduate student surveys either at the program or university level, simply because the focus is on undergraduate studies. Another limitation to this aspect of my research is that there is not 100 percent representation from all the graduate programs and all of their individual concentrations. Out of the 19 total areas (see Table 1), I was able to interview 15 Graduate Coordinators, which is 79% of the coordinators. Some of these were from the same program. Depending on the structure of their program, some of the programs had me interview their overall Graduate Coordinator, while others referred me to interview the individual Graduate Coordinators of the specific concentrations. So the feedback of the Graduate Coordinators is variable and cannot necessarily be generalized to all the concentrations or programs.

Despite the limitations of the research, we can learn much to serve as a baseline for what is happening at HSU around graduate student exit and alumni surveys in comparison to other universities. We will now take a look at how surveys are being used (or not) by HSU central offices and by individual graduate programs.

GRADUATE STUDENT SURVEYS AT HSU

To inform the creation of a pilot alumni survey for the Sociology graduate program, I wanted to understand what was happening around graduate student exit and alumni surveys at HSU. To do this, I spoke with two groups of people. One group was different campus offices that administer exit or alumni surveys or who have an interest in administering surveys. These offices were Alumni and Engagement (Forever Humboldt), the Office of Graduate Studies, and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. The purpose of these interviews was to understand what efforts around graduate student exit and alumni surveys may be underway at the university level, and what may have been done in the past.

I also interviewed the Graduate Coordinators of each of the graduate programs one-on-one. Not only did I want to learn what they were doing, or not doing, around surveys, I also wanted to learn about their interests and needs around doing exit or alumni surveys, and their thoughts around graduate student outreach in general.

What I found throughout all interviews was that there is a general consensus that graduate student exit and alumni surveys would be valuable. At the same time, there is a great deal of disconnect between university offices, and between university offices and departments around what can be done and how to do it. However, as shown in the literature, these are challenges that can be bridged with open communication and planning together. First, we will take a look at what was happening at a university level.

What Are University Offices Doing Around Surveys?

The Office of Graduate Studies (OGS) conducted exit surveys beginning in 2007 through 2009 or 2010, and had not conducted one since that time. While they completely understood the value and connection between conducting both exit surveys and alumni surveys, their primary interest was in an exit survey. The exit survey is where they saw their office's role in the overall process and were very interested in implementing a new exit survey. As we tried to explore the history, and potential future, of an exit survey, I found that there was very little institutional memory about the former OGS survey. The paper surveys had been stored in a file cabinet, and not transferred to any digital source, to anyone's knowledge. There was no record of where the paper surveys were at this time, so I was not able to gain access to the survey instrument. I had many questions about the survey, the instrument, and the process of how it was designed and conducted, but there was also no record of the overall vision or goals of the survey, nor any report that we could locate with any results. We were able to gain some insight from the previous Vice Provost about the survey. They recalled that the surveys were discontinued because the information had not served any purpose or been used to make any program or policy recommendations. This is an example of how the best ideas and intentions can sometimes end up as data that does not result in much benefit. As demonstrated in the literature, the long-term planning and strategy for surveys, including what action will come from the data, are crucial to as part of a successful assessment plan.

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) reported that they have not conducted any graduate student exit or alumni surveys in the past, although they do conduct exit surveys to undergraduate students. The First Destination Survey for undergraduate students has been administered since 2015, and is sent out every spring to undergraduates who are still enrolled during their final month at HSU after they have applied for graduation. The purpose of the survey is to obtain specific information required annually by the California State University Chancellor's Office, combined with other questions requested by Academic Advising. An interesting note about the First Destination Survey is that it does not specify on the survey itself or on the HSU website that the Survey is only about undergraduate students. Only by asking was I able to find out that it did not include graduate students. The OIE stated that the reason graduate students are not included in the First Destination Survey is because the questions provide the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) with data for the College Portrait which is a program specific to undergraduates. Another survey that the OIE conducted in the past for undergraduate students was the Leaver's Survey in 2010 through 2014. This survey was not an exit survey to get a feel for their experience at leaving, but rather to reach out to students who had not returned as anticipated. The survey was sent at the beginning of every fall semester to undergraduates who were eligible to register for classes but did not. The survey was not sent to graduate students because the numbers of graduate students who would meet that criteria would not have provided any significant information. Also, graduate students tend to register later than undergraduates, so asking graduate students why they are not returning would not have necessarily provided an accurate assessment of their situation.

The Office of Alumni and Engagement (OAE) does conduct an alumni survey for all undergraduate and graduate students every five years. The California State University

(CSU) Alumni Survey is a required by the CSU, and the OAE is facilitating the survey being sent out to HSU alumni. They do not actually have any control over the survey itself. The main questions are developed by the CSU Chancellor's Office, but the OAE does have the ability to pay for a small number of additional questions of their choice. The OAE pays an outside company to administer it and for the raw data, which they share with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Although HSU has the raw data, the survey results themselves are not shared on the HSU website. Instead, it appears on the CSU website because it is a CSU-owned survey. My question about this survey was if the questions would be redundant to any other alumni survey sent out by HSU or specific departments, and perhaps this five year survey was already accomplishing some of the goals of what people at HSU want from a graduate student alumni survey. However, the questions asked on the CSU Alumni Survey are very general and geared more around the affinity of the former student to their university. It would not satisfy the types of questions that programs have around the graduate student experience, curriculum, and learning outcomes.

Next, we will look at how programs are using graduate student surveys. To find out what programs were doing, I interviewed the Graduate Coordinators who were very generous with sharing their ideas. They were also very excited to learn what other programs thoughts were and what others were doing around the subject. First, I needed to know which programs were currently using exit and/or alumni surveys on a regular basis, or who had used one in the past.

Program Use of Surveys

My interviews revealed that very few programs were using either an exit survey or an alumni survey on a regular basis. In the case of exit surveys, two of the twelve programs were actively using one with all of their graduate students. The Business Administration program had been using one since at least 2015 (Appendix E), and the Environment and Community program had been using one since shortly after the program was started in 2001 (Appendix F). While the overall Kinesiology program did not use an exit survey for all graduate students, they conducted an exit survey targeted specifically to Adaptive Physical Education graduate students, to meet the requirements for a grant.

Aside from exit surveys, the remaining programs did not have any formal process for checking in with exiting graduate students. Some described informal and verbal communication with students when they left the program. For example, one graduate advisor in the Kinesiology program meets with their advisees as a group at as they are leaving each year. During the face-to-face group meeting, they talk about their individual master's projects, the courses, what the students would have done differently, and what the advisor could have done differently. While the information is helpful for the advisor to make adjustments, the results are not formally documented.

In the case of alumni surveys, the Environment and Community program is using a formalized alumni survey on a regular basis. However, the purpose of the survey is solely to obtain alumni information to showcase on an as-needed basis, for example on their website. It is not to inform curriculum changes. Approximately six months after graduation, the program emails students for whom they have contact information and who they know would want to share information.

In comparison to using surveys on a regular basis, more programs had used something in the past but were not using one currently. While four programs had used an alumni survey in the past as a one-off effort, none of the programs had used an exit survey in the past in a similar way. If they used an exit survey in the past, they continue to do so now.

Table 3. HSU Graduate Program Exit and Alumni Survey Usage

	Graduate exit survey		Graduate alumni survey	
Program	Current use	Past use	Current use	Past use
Applied Anthropology	No	No	No	No
Biology				
Business Administration	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Education	No	No	No	Yes
English	No	No	No	No
Environmental Systems:				
• Energy, Technology, and Policy	No	No	No	Yes
• Engineering	No	No	No	Yes
• Geology	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Kinesiology	No	No	No	No
Psychology:				
• Academic Research	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
• Counseling (MFT)	No	No	No	No
• School Psychology	No	No	No	No
Public Sociology	No	No	No	Yes
Natural Resources:				
• Environmental Science and Management	No	No	No	No
• Fisheries	No	No	No	No
• Forest, Watershed, and Wildland Sciences	No	No	No	No
• Wildlife	No	No	No	No
Social Science – Environment and Community	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Social Work	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown

What can we learn from the programs who are using surveys currently or have used one in the past? I asked the Graduate Coordinators to describe the logistics of the surveys, their response rates, and what they do (did) with the information learned.

What Can We Learn From Programs Who Have Used Exit Surveys?

When programs put together their strategy for their exit surveys, they had to consider the following logistics: When is the best time to give the survey? How is the survey administered and by whom? Do all students receive the survey whether they are graduating or not? How is the survey communicated to audiences? Is the survey anonymous? Where is the data stored? Who analyzes the data? Then after they have analyzed the data, what actions do they take with information?

Exit surveys were being used by three programs at the time of the interviews: Business Administration, Environment and Community, and Kinesiology (Adaptive Physical Education). All three programs administer their surveys only to students completing the program, not to students who left the program before completing it.

First, the programs have to decide how they want to administer the survey. Because the programs are conducting their surveys from within their own departments, they have to find the method that best works for them and their staff. For example, while the Business Administration and Kinesiology programs administers paper exit surveys to all students as a group in class, in contrast, the Environment and Community program administers online surveys to individual students via email.

The differences in the methods of administration also means differences in the way a programs analyze and store their data. For example, while the Environment and Community online survey raw data is stored in Survey Monkey or Google Forms, in contrast, the Business Administration paper surveys are scanned and stored on a secure shared drive. Additionally, the data from the paper surveys is coded by the administrative analyst. For the programs who use online surveys, the analysis of data varies depending on staffing and how different programs use the functions of the online survey program. For example, the Environment and Community program uses Survey Monkey to compile the data, while Kinesiology department staff analyzes the data from their exit survey.

Programs also have to decide *when* is the best time to administer the survey and how best to communicate the survey and encourage students to participate. Ultimately, these key actions can affect their response rate. For the Business Administration program, they have found it effective to conduct their exit survey in the summer, which is the final term of the program. The faculty member handing out the surveys verbally encourages the students to complete the optional survey. Although students can take the paper survey with them and return it through email or in-person, most students return their surveys at the end of class, resulting in response rate higher than 90 percent.

Although very different, the Environment and Community program uses equally effective methods of timing and socialization for their survey. They have chosen to administer the survey to each individual student as they finish their culminating experience. Although it is more time-consuming to administer the survey on an individual basis rather than to the whole cohort at the end of their fourth semester, they have moved to this method since students can take different time lengths to finish the program. To communicate the survey, the Graduate Coordinator first sends out a preliminary email to the cohort alerting them that they will be receiving the optional survey and requesting their participation. Then, when the program ASC receives notification from the Office of Graduate Studies that the student has submitted their thesis or project, the ASC sends the link to the survey via email to the individual student. Lastly, the Graduate Coordinator sends out another email to the cohort reminding them to participate. The Graduate Coordinator reported that they get pretty good response rate probably as a result of the individualized student email contact at the time they submit their project or thesis.

Another factor that programs have to consider in their survey design is whether the survey should be anonymous or not. The literature states that anonymity is important to elicit high response rates, yet the survey conducted by the Environment and Community program is *not* anonymous, and they receive high response rates. They attribute their high rates to the timing and individual method of administration. On the other hand, the Business Administration program's survey *is* anonymous, and the Graduate Coordinator stated that he thought this contributed to the high response rate because students know there are no negative ramifications for responding. These examples demonstrate that anonymity is only one factor to consider when designing surveys and thinking about response rates.

Now that the surveys have been administered and the data is in, what do programs do with the information? All programs that used exit surveys reported that they review the results s at faculty meetings or retreats and use the feedback to make adjustments to classes where possible.

For example, Business Administration’s students gave feedback in the past that they did not feel they were coming out prepared with professional skills like interviewing, applying for jobs, or building a resume. The program made changes, including embedding these skills within the classes, helping students build a LinkedIn profile, and bringing in professionals from the community to talk about these topics. Additionally, they used the feedback to provide coaching tips to instructors or around particular classes. Besides the internal use of the information, the program reported the data to their accreditation body.

What Can We Learn From Programs Who Have Used Alumni Surveys?

Alumni surveys have been used by five programs. While Environment and Community uses an alumni survey on an ongoing basis, Business Administration, Education (Appendix G), Environmental Systems (Appendix H), and Sociology (Appendix I) have used alumni surveys in the past as one-time efforts between 2013 and 2018. All the same issues have to be taken into account about response rates when designing an alumni survey as when you design an exit survey. Additionally, there is also the challenge of compiling the most accurate contact lists for former students.

Although the Environment and Community program alumni survey is the only one that is used on an ongoing basis, the structure is not typical of what is described in the literature or what other programs have done in the past. They do not have a challenge compiling contact lists, because they send out their survey to targeted and known students on an as-needed basis when the program would like to showcase alumni information. As a result, their response rate is high. However, since the program does not use the survey information for programmatic improvement purposes, response rate is not a main concern for them.

Because the majority of the programs who used an alumni survey used it as a one-time effort, they all sent them out to several cohorts all at once to obtain as many responses as possible. Some programs surveyed five years of cohorts, while others surveyed ten years of cohorts.

Three of the four programs who used alumni surveys sent surveys only to students who graduated. The general feeling from Graduate Coordinators was that it would have been good to get the feedback of people who had not completed their program, but logistically, they ended up only surveying graduates since they were working off alumni lists. The exception is the Sociology program who intentionally sent the survey to students who participated in the program but did not graduate.

The choice to make the alumni surveys anonymous or not anonymous was varied, just as it was for the exit surveys. While the Sociology and Education programs chose to make their survey anonymous, the Environmental Systems survey chose not to make their survey anonymous because they wanted to be able to link the information to the person's personal information, such as their prior university.

All the Graduate Coordinators of the other (three) programs who have used an alumni survey shared that the effort to compile contact lists for alumni was difficult and time-consuming. The programs often used a “scavenger methodology,” as one Graduate Coordinator put it. This method consists of using their HSU email addresses, getting emails from faculty who may still be in touch with the student, combing email inboxes for most current email address, and looking the students up on Facebook and LinkedIn. This process can have varying levels of success to get accurate and current contacts, and as documented in the literature, the quality of contact lists has a direct effect on response rates.

The Graduate Coordinators described the effects that their contact lists had on their response rates. For example, the Environmental Systems program reported a high 40 to 50 percent response rate for the Environmental Resources Engineering concentration and a 75 percent rate for Energy Technology and Policy (ETAP) concentration. The Graduate Coordinator attributed the high response rate for ETAP in part to reaching those students more effectively, as they keep in contact with many of the alumni, and therefore, have accurate contact information for them. It was for this reason that the Graduate Coordinator chose to do their alumni survey in-house instead of through Forever Humboldt. They thought that people would recognize the name sending the Google form and be more likely to respond. In contrast, the Business Administration program is an example of how a lack of quality contact lists can hurt the effort overall. The Graduate Coordinator attributed lower response rates to inaccurate contact information, in addition to lack of time for follow-up. They stated that the time involved for the low response rate made it not worthwhile to continue the alumni survey again.

The response rates programs obtained varied depending not only on the quality of their contact lists, but also on the methods of administration. For example, the Education program survey had a high response rate of 70 percent, potentially due to their method of administration rather than their quality of contact lists. They chose to use the Dillman Design Method to send out a series of paper communications to each alumni through the postal mail, rather than using online methods as the other programs did. The Graduate Coordinator speculated that the process of personalized and sequenced paper letters and reminders contributed to their high response rate.

For those programs who used online surveys, they then stored their raw data on the online program they used. Analysis of the data was done by whomever in the program had the resources (e.g. time) to do the work. For the Sociology program, the data was analyzed and put together by Sociology students in a class to gain hands-on experience. The Graduate Coordinators of the Environmental Systems program did their data analysis. The analysis was housed within the departments, not with HSU overall.

Now that they had the data, what did the programs do with it? Programs used the data in a variety of ways depending on their initial motivation for conducting the alumni surveys. For example, the Education program had launched their alumni survey specifically to gather data for a program review. They used the data as evidence to support the maintenance of certain aspects of the program that alumni stated they cared about and valued. Other examples are the Environmental Systems and Sociology programs who used the feedback to make curriculum changes and recommended advising practices.

In the case of the Environmental Systems program, they had a very positive experience and are considering continuing the use of alumni surveys. First, the Graduate Coordinators shared a report at a faculty meeting as part of their program assessment. While the alumni survey was not supposed to be counted as direct evidence for assessment, the faculty found it was more helpful than any other assessment activities they had done, because they were able to tailor it to their specific questions. They appreciated the ability to reflect on what they could do next, and it gave them a clear set of actionable items. From the productive discussion, they identified three or four things they wanted to change in the curriculum. For example, they found that more of their graduates are getting data analysis jobs then they realized, so they realized they needed to strengthen that part of the curriculum. In addition, they got a lot of data they could use to recruit and update their website about where their graduates go on to get jobs.

Another example is the Sociology program alumni survey that was also designed to gain a feel for the climate of the program and how to support graduate student retention. Their survey included questions asking about the student's relationship with their advisor, their coordinator, and their committee chair. From the feedback, they learned there was a mismatch of expectations. As a result a recommendation was made for all students and faculty advisors go into their first meeting with an expectation checklist. The effort was started to institutionalize advising norms for the graduate program.

These examples of programs using alumni surveys are still just a few. We know that the majority of programs are not using alumni surveys. I was also interested in learning about the different ways programs are reaching out to their graduate students and why. This would help me understand if there was a need for support in graduate student outreach.

What Are Other Ways Programs Are Reaching Out To Their Graduate Students?

Programs described the many other informal ways they tried to track their alumni and build community with them. All of the Graduate Coordinators stated that the main way they connected with former students is through their individual relationships that they maintained with specific students. The most common way they connected was through email with individuals. Former students often contact former professors with questions or asking for advice. Several graduate coordinators talked about continuing to collaborate with their former graduate students on projects, research, or publications. For the graduates who stayed local to the area, they saw them at community functions or collaborated on local events. Sometimes local alumni come back and do presentations for current students. For example, the English program Graduate Coordinator organized an orientation in the fall, and invited former graduates to attend to give advice, talk about what they are doing, and how they are using their degree.

Another way that programs reach out to former graduate students is by keeping them on their large group email distribution lists. Three Graduate Coordinators stated that their programs regularly sends out group emails to alumni about job opportunities. The Fisheries and Wildlife concentrations of the Natural Resources program uses their email lists to send out semi-annual newsletters to both undergraduate and graduate students.

One outreach method that had mixed reactions was social media. Five of the Graduate Coordinators mentioned their departments used social media sites; however, they were not sure of how much the graduate students used the social media sites to connect. Also the sites did not necessarily serve the graduate student community specifically. LinkedIn was a social media method that was mentioned as an alternative. For example, the Business Administration and Environment and Community programs discussed encouraging their graduate students to build a LinkedIn profile because it is more professional than social; however, they recognized the drawbacks to it since there can be costs for the service and LinkedIn sells client information.

There are exceptions to the desire for graduate student outreach among programs. The Education Graduate Coordinator stated that they have not had any requests from former students to stay in contact. They attributed this to the fact that teachers are very busy doing their work at their schools and not interested in the department once they have graduated. They added that there is no real benefit to using alumni outreach to ask for donations from educators as they cannot afford to donate back to their graduate program.

The majority of Graduate Coordinators expressed the desire and common practice of reaching out to their graduate alumni, for all the reasons described above. Overwhelmingly, the Graduate Coordinators also all voiced the desire for graduate student exit and alumni surveys to occur. The interviews with University offices revealed that they see the value in graduate student surveys as well. So why aren’t graduate student exit and alumni surveys happening at a university level? Why aren’t more programs using exit and alumni surveys on their own? What support do they need to make them happen?

WHY ARE GRADUATE STUDENT EXIT AND ALUMNI SURVEYS NOT BEING DONE MORE?

Graduate Coordinators' Doubts About Surveys

While the Graduate Coordinators expressed great interest in exit and alumni surveys, they did have some doubts about doing them. Doubts about doing surveys often hinged on other challenges programs experienced around resources. For example, one Graduate Coordinator was doubtful their program would be able to actually use the information from an alumni survey even if they wanted to because their program did not have the resources to design or maintain alumni information on their program website.

Challenges with resources resulted in skepticism by some Graduate Coordinators about the value of either an exit or alumni survey based on their past experiences. One reason for their skepticism was that there really are no resources to change things for the better, even if the data supports the change. Another reason for skepticism was the opposite scenario. What if the data supported maintaining programs or structures, yet the people making decisions do not use that data to make informed decisions and change the programs or structures anyway?

A few people expressed fear of how survey data could be used by administration. What if survey data were used against a program? In times of tight budgets, some were nervous about data being used to justify why a program could be up for elimination.

Other concerns stemmed from the idea of surveys being administered centrally by the university as opposed to from within the program or department. As shown in the literature, programs were much more in support of centralization as long as they still had input and some control over the surveys and questions. Additionally, Graduate Coordinators stated that they would want to make sure that they had access to the data easily. The topic of centralizing surveys is elaborated upon in the section on the ideal survey.

Despite any concerns voiced, if it was possible to make surveys happen, Graduate Coordinators said they want to be able to get the information and learn from student feedback. They completely see the value of the information and the process; it is just a matter of making it happen. So why are more programs not doing surveys now on a regular basis? How can the university assist in making graduate student exit and alumni surveys a reality?

Why Aren't More Graduate Programs Doing Their Own Surveys?

Time was the biggest factor programs are not using graduate student surveys. Of the ten programs that were not using either an exit or alumni survey, nine Graduate Coordinators stated that lack of time was the main reason.

> It is a question of time, and just the energy and effort that's required to put a survey together, and to administer it, and to do it more than once. We're pretty flat out slammed. It's maybe not the priority. We have a lot of things we would like to do. Yes, we could get valuable information. But we are more concerned with getting students through right now. So the ability to think on a slightly longer time horizon is hard. It's hard to find the time for that.

The resource of "time" has multiple dimensions. Graduate Coordinators described different aspects of the resource of time that they needed to make surveys happen for their programs. Survey processes can be labor-intensive from beginning to end. In the case of alumni surveys, the challenge of connecting with alumni and putting together quality contact lists can be time-consuming. All the programs who had used an alumni survey in the past had tried to piece together contact lists from faculty, email inboxes, and social media sites. Graduate Coordinators stated that they needed assistance with obtaining a quality list, and questioned who owns the list or how they could access the contact information.

The difficulties of obtaining alumni lists and the common question of how to get access to one is an example of the obstacle presented by lack of communication and potentially, the lack of an institutional mechanism for “training” Graduate Coordinators on what resources are available to them. The Office of Alumni and Engagement (OAE) shared that they have been trying to share the process of obtaining lists, alumni or otherwise. They walked me through the process of obtaining a contact list using the Office of Institutional Data Request Process. The process is open and free for any program or department and is located on website of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Once the request is received by the appropriate department (e.g. Alumni Relations), they review it to make sure that there is not any overlapping or competing requests, and then provide the contact list back to the requestor. Of the Graduate Coordinators I interviewed who were doing or had done alumni surveys, none of the programs used the Office of Institutional Data Request process to obtain a compiled alumni contact list. This is an additional resource that, unfortunately, not many departments take advantage of.

Another aspect related to the resource of time is budget. Programs either need the budget or release time to enable someone to compile and maintain the contact lists, do the survey, gather data, make the follow-up calls, and analyze the data. The challenge was the finances and resources to fund the time required to do the work. Without the time and budget to compile quality contact lists and follow-through, Graduate Coordinators pointed out the low response rates that can result.

The resource of time, or not enough of it, also surfaces in the issues of turnover and understaffing. Turnover in roles such as the Graduate Coordinator and administrative support staff make it difficult to establish any foundation for work to be done. For example, one program described how one of their Administrative Support Assistants (ASA) was shared between multiple departments, resulting in them leaving the role, which meant retraining a new partial-time ASA. Again, these situations are related to the challenges of limited budget and time allotted for programs to be able to successfully implement and maintain graduate surveys.

One program had a different perspective about the time challenge. The Graduate Coordinator of the Environmental Systems program who used an alumni survey in spring 2018 stated that while it was time consuming to get the list together the first time, they did not think it would continue to be time-consuming now that they had the process down. In their experience, the writing of the questions was not a terribly time-consuming process and sending the survey out was easy. Additionally, because they are accustomed to the work of data analysis, the relatively small number of responses did not take very much time to analyze.

A second reason programs are not using surveys is because they may not have had a strong motivation for their programs to gain that information. Five Graduate

Coordinators shared a variety of reasons why their programs had not been compelled to initiate such a work effort. First of all, programs often graduate small numbers of students each year and are in-touch with them. Three Graduate Coordinators said their programs kept in touch with graduates and did not need to find out where they were because they already knew. Second of all, others expressed there is so much going on assessment wise already, or they receive feedback from their students informally without surveys because of the hands-on relationships between faculty and graduate student work.

Another example of why a program may not have had a strong motivation to conduct surveys is demonstrated by the Biology program. The Graduate Coordinator speculated there are three reasons why their program has not had a huge impetus to do surveys. First, retention has not been a huge issue for their program. Second, the program has not been desperate to fundraise on their own. Third, the program has not had the need to recruit since they have robust application pools without significant recruiting efforts. This did not mean that they did not see the value of surveys, but they could not see how they could find the time resources required when there had not been a strong need yet.

Table 4. Why aren't more graduate programs conducting graduate student surveys?

Reason	Number of times mentioned
Time and resource constraints: • Compiling contact lists • No budget or release time • Turnover or understaffing	17
Low priority: • Already get feedback through other methods • Already in touch with alumni • No need to recruit • Retention not a problem	6

The obstacles to programs conducting their own surveys that the Graduate Coordinators described are documented in the literature. I also learned in the interviews with the University offices that they also saw the value in conducting graduate student exit and alumni surveys, but there were challenges to conducting them at the university level as well. We will now take a look at some of those challenges.

Why Aren't Graduate Student Exit and Alumni Surveys Being Done by Centrally by University Offices?

In speaking with the Office of Graduate Studies (OGS), the Office of Alumni and Engagement (OAE), and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE), it became apparent how important communication and collaboration with all the key stakeholders truly is in the planning of surveys, as documented in the literature. Each office had distinct thoughts on the roles and responsibilities within a survey process that differed from the others. Additionally, there are technical challenges at the university level to making survey information valuable long-term to the university as a whole.

First, there were differing ideas by all three offices about who should be the responsible parties for graduate student surveys and processes. The Office of Graduate Studies (OGS) clearly expressed to me their desire for a graduate student exit survey to be done. They were very interested in supporting any processes and development and wanted to be able to leverage the learnings to support graduate programs. Additionally, while they acknowledged that the value of an exit survey goes hand in hand with an alumni survey, they were clear that an exit survey would be more helpful than an alumni survey for their office in terms of assessment and retention. They described the division of duties with the OGS being responsible for initiating an exit survey, while the Office of Alumni and Engagement should be responsible for an alumni survey.

Part of the issue of ownership and management is that an alumni survey could serve numerous goals which cross over the needs and interests of different areas, even if they benefit everyone as a whole. The management of the procedure would include the systematic initiation of the survey process on a regular schedule, the communication of the survey, the review and maintenance of the survey instrument, and the “training” on the process for existing and new Graduate Coordinators. Graduate programs are interested in student experience, building community, as well as curriculum and learning outcome information. The OAE, which is part of Advancement, is interested in engagement information. An alumni survey could serve all those purposes. So who should own an alumni survey procedure? The OAE stated that although their office would assist with sending out survey information to alumni, they would not own the management of the process long-term, and they would not analyze the data. Rather, they thought that the OGS would own the process since the information is benefiting graduate programs, especially since the programs themselves are the ones who have control of programming. But what about the alumni stories that could potentially be used for marketing and recruiting? The OAE stated that they have all the tools available to help programs send out alumni surveys, and in fact, can create templates with marketing (Marcom) to make the emails match the university branding. However, they felt the results should go to the OGS, since they are responsible for their own marketing, and Graduate Coordinators are responsible for recruiting.

The bureaucratic challenges that the OAE described, and confusion between roles of different offices, seems to come down to resources. I had the same question that many of the Graduate Coordinators had as well: Wouldn't the university as a whole want the alumni stories for marketing and recruiting purposes? The OAE explained that while the university as a whole does benefit from alumni survey information around recruiting, the OAE does not have the capacity to work with all that information since the university has scaled back their office. For the OAE to be able to take on that type of work, they would need more resources. Additionally, they stated that the Admissions Office was not using alumni stories until recently. Instead, the responsibility has fallen on the graduate programs who have been asked to be their own alumni and recruiting departments. In the opinion of the OEA, the alumni and admissions work should be linked under one umbrella so the story could be told full circle. Today, offices function very separately with their own sets of challenged resources. Information is gathered in through different methods, sometimes redundantly, sometimes inefficiently, because of lack of communication between departments and resource constraints. For example, while the Career Center and Marketing (Marcom) will take the alumni stories information and may feature them, it is still the responsibility of the graduate programs to obtain and pass on the information. Additionally, the OAE stated that Marcom receives a multitude of alumni profiles to highlight already, even without the graduate programs passing on the ones they obtain on their own.

If each of these offices and the university as a whole could benefit from graduate alumni information for all the multiple crossover purposes, wouldn't the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) be a good long-term fit for ownership of the procedure? The OAE explained to me that the OIE works primarily on current students, not alumni. They also thought that while it might be a place for it, the OIE has to match their work efforts to the institution's priorities at the time. If graduate studies information isn't a priority for the institution, it can't be a priority for OIE. The OAE added that graduate studies information would always be important to the OGS, so the responsibilities should be with the OGS. Their thought was that it also might take additional resources allocated to the OGS to do all of the work involved with graduate programs - such as recruitment, admission, retention, graduation, exit surveys and alumni outreach. In speaking with the OIE, staff offered another perspective on the procedures for graduate student exit and alumni surveys. For an exit survey, the OIE stated that if the survey was a priority for the university and that if would be going to the entire graduate student population each semester, then the OIE would very likely be the office administering the survey, not the OGS. In addition to the overall interest in the larger graduate student population, the OIE also has a Qualtrix license to facilitate the survey. At this time, OGS does not have access to Qualtrix, which is a more powerful online survey tool. Even if OIE was the responsible party to administer the survey, they would also have to hand off the data analysis, unless they also had additional resources provided to do that part of the work. For an alumni survey, the OIE stated that even though it involves alumni and not existing students, the OIE would still need to be involved because the use of the information goes beyond alumni purposes. They stated that since the exit survey and the alumni survey are linked in the end, they need to be able to correlate the surveys for them to be useful. They added that it could be possible for the OIE to administer it, but that no matter what, the OIE would need to be involved in the development and design of a survey, whether it is for current or alumni students.

We can see that collaboration and communication must occur between multiple university offices with the graduate programs before any survey can be designed. If the information gathered from a graduate alumni survey could truly be shared and useful for multiple areas, it seems it would have a better chance of adoption and obtaining resources to make it a university priority. Even with effective communication and collaboration, there are also some technological barriers at the university level that could impede the sharing of information.

The OAE explained some of the systems issues that may present some challenges. Apparently, the different areas of the university who “own” different types of information also may use different databases and communication tools to work with that information. For example, the OAE uses Net Community to communicate to alumni, and then stores the information in their database, Raiser's Edge. Their database has the ability to figure out the engagement over time of an alumni, including who opens the email, who answered, and who made a gift. When programs and departments use the OAE to assist in sending out communications, including alumni surveys, there is the benefit to having the communication data all stored over time. Later, if an office wants to go back and see who they can reach or follow up with, the OAE can see who their most engaged alumni are.

The technological disconnect occurs because the OIE does not use the same communication tool or database as the OAE when they survey current students. They use Gmail for their communication tool and PeopleSoft as their database, which is not tracked to the alumni database. Their platforms do not share information. So the current technology being used does not support the idea of tracking and storing information about a student from the time of admission, to graduation, and post-graduation, even though that is the ideal scenario from a recruitment and retention perspective. The OAE shared that there is the potential for this to change in the future when the contracts for the communications tools expire. New programs such as Sales Force, which is used by many other California State Universities, may be the next step for HSU, which enables the client to track the student from their first time as a prospect all the way to them as an alumnus. Additionally, if all areas were using a common platform, then it would be easier for new or interim staff or faculty to step in and use the resources and get to the information. However, for now, there is still the gap that even if a holistic approach were to be taken towards exit and alumni surveys at the university level, there are technological barriers to making the information useful at deeper levels.

Despite these challenges, it still was apparent that all areas I interviewed had the saw the value in conducting graduate student exit and alumni surveys and wanted to make it happen. They all experienced and anticipated obstacles to making it happen. Assuming the challenges could be overcome, I asked the Graduate Coordinators to describe their ideal scenario to me. In their dream world, what would that look like?

WOULD THE IDEAL SURVEY BE ADMINISTERED CENTRALLY OR FROM WITHIN INDIVIDUAL DEPARTMENTS?

I asked the Graduate Coordinators to describe their ideal scenarios for exit surveys and alumni surveys. This included what the process and structure of the survey would be, what they would want to learn from the survey, and what they would do with the information obtained from the survey. The most common topic discussed was around how surveys should be managed and by whom. All Graduate Coordinators said they were in favor of standardizing and institutionalizing the processes and structures for exit and alumni surveys. The majority of the Graduate Coordinators stated that they would like to see the surveys administered centrally. They discussed the benefits of an institutionalized and centralized surveys, as well as their fears. In conversation, the majority of Graduate Coordinators thought that the possible benefits outweighed the potential drawbacks or any fears they might have about the process.

One of the main benefits of centralization and institutionalization they described would be the institutional memory of the process. If surveys are held within a program or department, when someone changes roles, whether that be the Graduate Coordinator or the ASC, the process can be forgotten or lost, and the person new to the role has to start from scratch. They basically have to reinvent the wheel and find out if anything has been done in the past, how it was done, and who it was sent to. The same challenge applies when a person goes on a leave or sabbatical and someone steps in for an interim period. An example of this exact situation occurred during the time of my interviews. One program did have a process for surveys in place, and the interim Graduate Coordinator, through no fault of their own, was not aware of their current process. There was just no transfer of knowledge process in place. Graduate Coordinators stated that institutionalization and centralization of the process would be less messy and would make surveys more than a one-time effort. With centralized contact lists and a standardized approach and schedule, there would be a way to sustain the data collection and analysis on a long-term basis.

A second benefit described was the institutional knowledge provided by centralization and institutionalization. By having a centrally-held repository of data that would persist even when people change roles, the information could be accessed as-needed and even shared between programs. Additionally, a program could compare its own results from one cohort to another. Some Graduate Coordinators stated it would be nice to be able to see how things changed over the years, and also to have long-term data to show the value of their programs.

A third benefit discussed was savings of resources. As reported in the section about obstacles to doing surveys, lack of time and resources is the main reason programs are not using surveys. If surveys were centralized and resources were allocated for the work at the institutional level, the burden of time would be relieved off of Graduate Coordinators and the Administrative Support Coordinators (ASCs). Additionally, budgetary resources may be pooled if the work was done at the institutional level. With a common goal, rates for website design, for instance, might be able to be negotiated.

Finally, if the effort came from the institution, there would be a greater ability to use the information in conjunction with recruiting and retention. The university as a whole could look at the whole life of a graduate student, from the moment they are a prospective student, to graduation (or leaving). This type of full-cycle knowledge could help with recruitment and retention.

While the Graduate Coordinators all acknowledged the potential benefits of centralization and institutionalization of surveys, they also expressed their concerns. Some expressed fear of how the data could be used, potentially against a program. However, the majority of concerns were around surveys becoming no longer useful if they were centralized.

One reason a centralized survey could be less useful was if response rates were poor. For those who used surveys in the past and received good response rates, they were nervous about potential declines in response rates because former students do not have as strong of a relationship with the overall institution as compared to their program faculty. In addition to response rates being affected by centralization, one Graduate Coordinator also brought up the question of the *actual content* of responses. Would respondents answer differently, perhaps, more candidly, if the email sending out the survey came from the department or the Graduate Coordinator?

> People's connection to the program is different than people's connection to the university. So I don't know if they'll provide the same information if they think, "Oh, these data are going to these people we don't know, and what are they going to do with these data." Whereas, if they are sending to us in the program, I think most of them have a different relationship. So I don't know if we'll get the same information. Partly it's having a personal connection with the person who sent the email.

Another concern around usefulness of a centralized survey was around lack of control. One aspect of control is over the actual survey questions and process. Graduate

Coordinators said they would want programs to have tailored specific questions and a voice in coming up with all questions (general and program-specific). If the survey was to be useful to the programs, the questions would need to be designed to obtain the information that is meaningful for them. Part of the expressed desire to have input is around ensuring the quality of a survey. The fear expressed was that if a survey is poorly designed, then the data is meaningless.

Another aspect of control is having flexibility in the survey. When a program manages their own surveys, they have the flexibility to customize the surveys based on what they learned from the last ones. If the surveys were done by a centralized office, there is the potential that they would not have that same flexibility.

The last aspect of control is about access to data. When a program controls their own surveys, they can access and manipulate the data whenever they want. Graduate Coordinators expressed that if surveys were centralized, there would have to be an automatic way that programs could have access to the data.

Assuming the concerns around centralization could be addressed, the Graduate Coordinators described what their ideal scenarios for the administration of exit and alumni surveys. Now we will take a look at the specifics of each type of survey and what programs would like to see.

THE IDEAL EXIT SURVEY SCENARIO

The Process

The ideal scenario for an exit survey was easier to describe for the Graduate Coordinators than that of an alumni survey. The logistics of exit surveys tend to be less difficult than alumni surveys since the students are still in the program. While the desire for centralization of the exit survey process was the most common topic, the timing of when to administer an exit survey was the second most commonly discussed logistical topic for administering the exit survey. Four Graduate Coordinators stated that students should take the survey as a step in the process to graduate, such as when they file for graduation, or when they complete their final defense. However, one Graduate Coordinator thought that it should be done right *after* graduation when students are not so busy writing their thesis, but no so long after that they have checked HSU off their list. In terms of the method of delivery, the majority of Graduate Coordinators spoke about an exit survey as an online link emailed to the student; one coordinator stated that it should be done in-class to gain better response rates.

More often, the conversations around the ideal exit survey scenario revolved around what the programs would want to learn from the survey information and how they would use it. The Graduate Coordinators expressed a great interest in using the information to improve their programs.

What Would Programs Want To Learn From an Exit Survey and How Would They Use the Information?

Graduate Coordinators thought that the exit survey would be a good opportunity for students to reflect on their experience and serve as a snapshot at the end that experience. What did students think was the most beneficial in the program? What were flaws in the program? What do they wish would have been part of the program that was not? Graduate Coordinators wanted to understand students' perceptions around a wide range of topics, from the fundamental aspects of the curriculum and learning outcomes, to their relationships and the climate of the program, to their personal situations, to their overall experience with the university services. They also thought an exit survey could be a good tool to introduce graduating students' involvement as alumni.

The most common desire expressed was to understand student's thoughts about the curriculum, the materials used, and how the classes articulated with each other. From that information, programs could make adjustments to better organize student experiences. In conjunction with the classes and curriculum, some Graduate Coordinators specifically identified wanting to gain information on the learning outcomes. For instance, they want to understand what kinds of skills and knowledge do students think they are taking away that will be valuable? Do they think the program was effective at empowering them? With this information, programs could make changes as needed or reinforce things they are already doing.

The second most common topic that Graduate Coordinators brought up was to use the exit survey to begin the outreach to graduating students as future alumni. This could be an opportunity to ask the students if they would be interested in staying in touch, receiving fundraising requests, or be a mentor. The exit survey could be a tool to request future contact information since their university email would no longer be accessible at some point.

Two topics tied for the third most common topics. One topic was the desire to hear students' feedback about the climate of the program and how students felt about their relationships with the faculty. This topic could inform the programs in multiple different ways, depending on what they want to learn. For example, the Natural Resources program Graduate Coordinator stated this was important for their program since the interdisciplinary program draws on classes and faculty from different departments. Their goal is to provide a complete program and student feedback is essential. On the other hand, the Biology program Graduate Coordinator stated that they need to understand the interactions students have with their colleagues or their mentors to see how they can either help them complete their degrees in a timely manner, or slow them down. Another example is the Business Administration Program who thought they could learn how they might improve the climate around diversity and inclusion in their program.

The second topic that was the third most commonly expressed was to understand more about students' personal situations. For example, was the student working while in the program, were they single or did they have a family? While these factors are out of the control of programs, they were still were of interest to the two Graduate Coordinators who mentioned them, as they stated these were factors that could affect how quickly students were able to move through the program or how easy or difficult it could be to achieve their degree. An example of how this information could be helpful is demonstrated by a thought the Biology program Graduate Coordinator shared. They would like to be able to increase the salaries of their teaching assistants to help alleviate some of financial issues their program is seeing their students deal with:

> We might want to ask, “Would you have come here if you couldn’t have gotten an assistantship?” Finances have changed so dramatically for grad students. It’s really very different than it was even five years ago. My grad students that I talk to, they all are working other jobs. It wasn’t the case 15 years ago. It just wasn’t.

Other topics Graduate Coordinators thought could be helpful were brought up less frequently, but are still of interest to include. University services were brought up by one Graduate Coordinator who thought it was important to get data on difficulties students have with all the hoops and technology required to finish the degree. They reported that students often came to them with complaints about accessing forms on their computers, negative experiences with the Office of Graduate Studies, Digital Commons, the library, and formatting their thesis.

Retention was also brought up as an important topic. The data from an exit survey could support decisions made to lobby for the resources to meet the needs of graduate students and increase their retention.

THE IDEAL ALUMNI SURVEY SCENARIO

The Process

For the ideal scenario for an alumni survey, the processes and structures of institutionalization and standardization described by the Graduate Coordinators were very similar to those of the ideal scenario for an exit survey. Like the exit survey, the ability to have a voice in the design of alumni survey questions was important to the Graduate Coordinators. However, for alumni surveys, there were other logistics of the processes and structures for an ideal scenario that had to be considered. These included, who would want an alumni survey be sent to, how long after graduation should it be sent, and what would be the ideal way of sending the survey to gain the best response rate?

First, should an alumni survey be sent only to those students who completed the program or also to those who participated but did not graduate? Six of the thirteen Graduate Coordinators stated that they would want to send the alumni survey to both those who graduated and those who did not. One Graduate Coordinator stated that they would only want to send it those who graduated because although we should understand why someone is not completing the program, there is no value to following up with them down the road. Six of the Graduate Coordinators did not specify which students they would send an alumni survey to.

Second, when should the survey be sent to alumni? There were various timing suggestions for when to send out an alumni survey, including anywhere from one to six months to one year after leaving the program. The common idea was to give the former student enough of a period of reflection after the whirlwind and stress of trying to get their culminating experience done. Then follow-up surveys could be sent out on either an odd or even schedule every three to five years. The Graduate Coordinator of the Education program made a suggestion in consideration of the lives and schedules of teachers that could also apply to the other fields. They suggested to send an alumni survey mid-fall, to avoid the winter holidays, and the end of the school year.

Third, how should an alumni survey be sent out to reach people and get the best response rates? While most mentioned using online survey methods for ease, the Graduate Coordinator of the Education program suggested using paper surveys mailed through the postal service to alumni based on their program's previous experience using the Dillman method. The coordinator speculated that their response rate of 70 percent was the result of the process of personalized and sequenced paper letters and reminders, rather than an emailed online survey. Some of the Graduate Coordinators suggested using a mosaic approach of online and paper, if possible.

Lastly, some Graduate Coordinators emphasized the importance of keeping an alumni survey simple and straightforward. The Business Administration Graduate Coordinator suggested that a happy medium would be around 20 questions. They also stated that while the survey needed to be simple, it would need to contain critical questions customized for each graduate program so that all departments would be more likely to participate. For example, there could be five to ten general questions, and then the individual programs can ask five to ten questions.

What Would Programs Want To Learn From an Alumni Survey and How Would They Use the Information?

Many of the topics that the Graduate Coordinators wanted to learn about from an alumni survey were similar to the exit survey. However, instead of a snapshot of the student experience at the end of the program, they would have the benefit of time to gain a different perspective at different time lengths when the survey would be administered. The main topics of interest were around students' thoughts around the curriculum and learning outcomes now that they are out in the working world, the "where are they now" information, fundraising, and creating and maintaining alumni community.

As with the exit survey, Graduate Coordinators expressed the desire to hear former students' feedback around program curriculum, materials used, and how the classes articulated, now that they had time to reflect on the program. From that information the program could make adjustments to better articulate the graduate student experiences. Graduate Coordinators also specifically called out wanting to gain information on learning outcomes. Now that former students might be in jobs, they might have a different perspective on the curriculum depending on the skills they are using in those jobs. For example, the Business Administration program would want to know if the program is helping them in their career. Has the program better prepared them to achieve their life and career goals?

Fundraising was another popular theme that Graduate Coordinators spoke about as a use for an alumni survey. The survey would be a point of contact with alumni in order to request donations from them to be directed to their graduate program. For example, the Biology program Graduate Coordinator stated that most of their scholarships are for undergraduate students, and perhaps they could have alumni choose to designate their donation into graduate student scholarships funded by alumni.

The most common response from the thirteen interviews was the desire to gather job and career information of their alumni. The Graduate Coordinators stated that they would like to have a standard process to find out where the graduates are now. The Environmental Systems program Graduate Coordinator explained the questions they asked on their 2018 alumni survey.

> We wanted to understand - Are people working in the field? Are people successfully getting employment related to the field they studied? We are interested in seeing what they do immediately after they graduate. What's their first job? And then some years further out, to see if they're able to advance in that field? We wanted to see what kinds of jobs they are getting. We had them describe those positions a little bit to understand what sort of skills they need and whether or not those are linked back to things we are providing them. We asked them to reflect on the quality of education to prepare them for the kind of work they are doing. So we are interested in both career trajectory and program assessment now that they have a little bit of perspective now that they are a few years out.

This sentiment aligns with what other Graduate Coordinators expressed. The reason for wanting this information is two-fold. One reason is to understand how the programs are doing by looking at the types of jobs alumni are getting, and how well alumni are succeeding in their career trajectories. A second reason graduate programs want the information is to use for marketing.

Marketing and recruiting was the one of the main values of graduate student information. Eight Graduate Coordinators stated they would use the alumni profiles for recruiting and marketing purposes. To be able to say, "This is what our graduates are doing," is a huge marketing tool. Many programs are already featuring alumni stories on their websites, and those who are not, would like to start. For example, although the Business Administration graduate program was capped at the time of the study, the Graduate Coordinator stated they could potentially grow from an online standpoint. Alumni survey data demonstrate the strength of the program to gain more support from the university. The Counseling Psychology program Graduate Coordinator stated they would use statistics on what percentage of their graduate students gain licensure and what sorts of settings they end up working in. This type of field-specific data obtained from an alumni survey would serve the program well to recruit students looking for a graduate program.

Another commonly expressed use for a graduate alumni survey was to create community connections. Seven Graduate Coordinators spoke of the positive networking potential of the alumni community. For example, the Environment and Community interim Graduate Coordinator felt that an alumni group could be really valuable and helpful to each other. They could share job opportunities or offer beneficial advice to each other and current graduate students. Some Graduate Coordinators expressed the desire to tap into their alumni community for mentors. For example, the Applied Anthropology program Graduate Coordinator was very excited about the idea of having alumni mentor a new cohort. They speculated that virtual mentoring could work well work well in the online environment of their primarily distance program.

Other opportunities for creating community and networking connections through an alumni survey were suggested by the Sociology program Graduate Coordinator. Alumni may be able to offer placement opportunities for graduate students in the

Practicing tract of the program. The program could bring alumni back to serve on the community advisory board. Alumni could also attend a class of the Practicing Sociology seminar to give presentations. While this practice is currently in place, having more alumni to invite would alleviate those requests on the same alumni repeatedly.

Another important use of data from an alumni survey discussed by the Graduate Coordinators was graduate student retention. As stated in the literature, graduate students are a unique population and often are assumed to be able to fend for themselves as they are no longer undergraduates. An alumni survey could support retention efforts by helping to create and maintain connections between current graduate students and former graduate students. Those connections could help current graduate students get through the challenges of the program. As one Graduate Coordinator described:

> Another norm I would like to create is every time we have a graduation party, invite the alumni. So there's this constant bringing people on to campus every year, and creating traditions. It shows you the possibility. There's life after program. And there's many formulas. But you would never know that if you don't have that sense of community.

As argued in the literature, retention work has to be integrated with recruiting to be successful long-term. One Graduate Coordinator described an alumni survey and alumni outreach as part of the larger efforts institutions must make to connect recruitment and retention:

> We need to understand from the point of when people start to look at programs, when they say where might I want to go - all the way through. We still care about you after you graduated from our program. We have to do a full circle and understand that those are all interconnected. Those cool stories from our alumni that make us feel good about what we do can also help with recruitment and the next generation. We have to have a picture of recruitment, retention, and feedback back to the start.

The majority of Graduate Coordinators thought that an alumni survey could contribute to retention efforts. While one stated that they were not convinced that an alumni survey could help since there would be such a wide range of challenges, they did acknowledge that there would not be any harm in asking in case larger themes emerge. Even those programs who stated that retention was not a huge issue for their program thought that the information could help the university and the programs meet the needs of graduate students better. For example, Graduate Coordinators often stated that financial resources and the necessity to work many hours is a main challenge for their graduate students. Other personal challenges such as housing and food scarcity and mental and physical health issues are individual situations that come up. Even if an alumni survey cannot provide a direct “fix” for individual situations, Graduate Coordinators recognized that documenting these needs and challenges might help to bring more resources to help graduate students who cannot successfully complete their program in part because of personal challenges.

Now that we have taken a look at what programs want to learn from surveys and the ways programs would use the information obtained from surveys, we will turn to some examples of surveys to see how some programs are getting that information. We will take a look at surveys that are currently being used by programs and some that have been used in the past.

A COMPARISON OF GRADUATE STUDENT SURVEY EXAMPLES

Understanding what types of questions that are being used or have been used in the past by programs can help inform future surveys. Since the majority of the literature examples are of undergraduate surveys, the comparisons here are between graduate student surveys conducted at HSU, with only one or two from other universities.

Exit Surveys

The exit surveys used by the HSU Business Administration, the Environment and Community, and the Sociology programs were all from 2018. They are all very similar in length, with around 17 questions, but completely different in format and structure. While the Environment and Community survey uses more open-ended questions, the Sociology and Business Administration uses more close-ended questions or Likert-scale style questions.

There are only two areas or topics of interest common to all three programs' surveys: career (or post-graduation) plans and areas of improvement for the program. Sometimes the latter is phrased around parts of the program with which the student was "least satisfied." In the case of the Sociology program, the question is specific to how the curriculum could be improved; whereas, in surveys used by other HSU graduate programs, the question is phrased more generally in reference to the program overall.

Other areas of interest were typically shared across two of the programs' surveys. These included questions about the following topics: relationships with faculty and their cohort, advising, what courses they took, the helpfulness of classes (and suggestions), topics students would have liked to develop more in depth, if the program helped them achieve their goals, the top ideas or skills they obtained in the program, and open suggestions for their overall experience in the program. All other questions were specific to one program's survey.

Table 5. Graduate Exit Survey Questions and Topics

Question or Topic is…	Question or Topic
Common to all surveys	• Career or post-graduation plans • Suggestions to improve the program
Common to at least two surveys	• Relationships with faculty and cohort • Advising • What courses they took • Helpfulness of classes • Topics they would have liked to develop more • If the program helped them achieve their goals • Top ideas learned or skills gained • Open suggestions about overall program experience
Specific to one survey	• Self-rating on specific skills learned in program • Teaching methods they liked or disliked • Most memorable assignment or project • The best part of the program • Would they recommend the program • Strengths of the program • What attracted them to the program • Barriers to completing the program • Equity and inclusion issues in program • Demographics of respondent • Contact information

I compared the HSU graduate exit surveys to another example shared with me that is used by the School Psychology graduate program at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The survey is more similar in structure to the HSU Business Administration and Environment and Community surveys. While the Marywood survey also asks questions to gain information around learning outcomes, future plans, and overall program experience, only a few of the actual questions are similar to those from the HSU surveys. The questions of the HSU surveys are more similar to each other than they are to the Marywood survey.

Alumni Surveys

I compared the graduate alumni surveys from the following programs: Education, Environment and Community, Environmental Systems, and Sociology. In the case of the Sociology survey, it was a joint exit and alumni survey. All the surveys were conducted in 2018 with the exception of the Education survey which was conducted in 2014. Unlike the surveys which were strictly exit surveys, there was much more variance between alumni surveys both in length and in types of questions asked. For example, the Environment and Community survey has six questions (all open-ended), while the Sociology survey has 33 questions (eight open-ended). The Sociology survey was longer because it was a combined exit and alumni survey. I compared the HSU surveys with a survey used by the San Jose State University Psychology Master's program in 2000. It is much more similar to the HSU alumni surveys than the Marywood University exit survey was to the HSU exit surveys.

The two questions they all have in common mirror the exit survey: current job or phase of education and suggestions to improve the program. In the case of the Sociology survey, the latter question is specific again to curriculum suggestions. Other common questions or topics of interest common to at least two programs include: year graduated, salary, helpfulness of classes or other aspects of the program to their job or career, topics they wish they could have developed more, things they liked about the program, if they would repeat the program, and if they want to stay in contact with other alumni. The majority of questions for each survey are specific to the survey for that program and do not overlap with the others.

Table 6. Graduate Alumni Survey Questions and Topics

Question or Topic is…	Question or Topic
Common to all surveys	• Current job or phase of education • Suggestions to improve the program
Common to at least two surveys	• Year graduated • Salary • Helpfulness of classes or other aspects of the program to their job or career • Job changes experienced after graduation • Did they program prepare them for their career or life • Helpfulness of classes to t heir career • Topics they wish they could have developed more • Things they liked about the program • Would they repeat the program • Do they want to stay in contact with other alumni • Open suggestions about overall program experience
Specific to one survey	• Undergraduate education history • Time it took to complete the program • Were they part-time of full-time • Preference for online or face-to-face classes • Effectiveness of online courses • Their expectations of the program and if they were met • How the program affected them personally and professionally • Strengths of the program • What attracted them to the program • Would they recommend the program • Barriers to completing the program • Equity and inclusion issues in the program • Post-graduation journey (not specific to job) • How long it took for them to get a job after graduation • What types of job searching techniques worked for them • Where they are living • What their job was before they completed the program • If their job is related to the field of their degree • Job satisfaction • Demographics of respondent • Contact information

From these few examples of surveys being used at HSU, we can see how some of the objectives of surveys are similar across programs. Many of their questions are similar and want to draw out the same information. However, there also is a significant amount of individuality in both the goals of the surveys as well as the questions used. We can see how creating a centralized survey would require the collaboration of all key stakeholders as discussed in the literature.

Designing, writing, and administering the 2018 Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey was also a good learning process to help inform this study. I present the findings of that survey next and then turn to some of the key things learned from the Sociology pilot survey that can be applied to other surveys used in the future.

RESULTS OF THE 2018 HSU PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY GRADUATE PROGRAM EVALUATION SURVEY

The survey was created to test an exit and alumni survey for the Sociology department. The discussion of the survey can also inform this study of what assessment might work for HSU's multiple graduate programs. The survey was designed to not only gather student feedback about the program, but also obtain contact information to enable former students to network together and continue building a community. As described in the Methodology section, the Humboldt State University (HSU) Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey was emailed to a total of 33 sociology graduate students who left the program in 2016, 2017, or spring 2018, including people who completed the program and those who did not complete the program. I present the findings of the survey in the order in which the questions were asked, with the exception of the demographics, which were asked at the end of the survey. Each section allows the department to assess different aspects of the program.

Demographics: Who Are The Respondents?

A total of 18 responses were received for a response rate of 55%. All but one of the respondents had completed or were about to complete the program, with eight respondents completing the program in 2016; three completing the program in 2017; and seven completing the program in spring 2018. The majority of respondents had been full-time students, with three part-time student respondents. Between the different tracts of the sociology program, six respondents were in the practicing tract; seven were in the teaching tract; and five were in both tracts.

The majority of respondents were female (n=10), while the remainder of the respondents were split between male (n=4) and those who declined to state their gender identification (n=4). None of the respondents chose the gender identification options of transgender or other (write-in). The female respondents represent 71 percent of the respondents who chose to provide their gender identity. Women are overrepresented in this sample, as they makeup, on average, 56 percent of enrolled female sociology graduate students at HSU (2012-2017).

The racial or ethnic identity of the respondents was mostly White (n=9). Four respondents (22 percent) declined to state their racial or ethnic identity, and the remainder were split between several different non-White options. None of the respondents chose the standalone categories of Black, Asian American, or Native/Indian/Indigenous. Three respondents chose to use the write-in option. Because of the small overall number of respondents and even smaller numbers of those who identified in any one of the non-White categories, those numbers of respondents (n=5) have been combined into one category of "non-White" for the remainder of the survey results. The non-White respondents represent 36 percent of the respondents who chose to state their racial or ethnic identity. This somewhat reflects the typical 32 percent average (2012-2017) of "underrepresented" sociology graduate students. However, because the number of respondents who declined to state their gender or racial/ethnic identity represents 22 percent of the total number of respondents, it cannot be inferred if the respondents reflect the typical demographic makeup of the sociology graduate population in terms of gender or racial or ethnic identity.

Time to Complete Degree

The time it took the respondents to complete their degree was consistent for full-time students with an average of 4.64 semesters (n=15), with students in the practicing tract averaging slightly longer at five semesters than the teaching tract at four semesters. For students who entered the program in 2012 (n=2), it took an average of seven semesters to complete the degree, while it took an average of 4.3 semesters for students who entered the program in 2014, 2015, and 2016. The number of responses is too small to break down the results further by year and by other factors such as race or ethnicity, gender, tract, full-time or part-time to be significant and to maintain respondent anonymity.

Table 7. Full-time students: Number of semesters to complete the program by year started

Year started program	Average number of semesters to complete program
2012 (n=2)	7
2014 (n=3)	4
2015 (n=4)	4.7
2016 (n=5)	4.2

Table 8. Part-time students: Number of semesters to complete the program by year started and tract

Year started program	Tract in program	Average number of semesters to complete program
2010 (n=1)	Teaching and Practicing	14
2012 (n=1)	Teaching and Practicing	14
2014 (n=1)	Teaching	7

Table 9. Full-time students: Number of semesters to complete the program by tract

Tract	Average number of semesters to complete program
Practicing (n=6)	5
Teaching (n=7)	4
Practicing and Teaching (n=5)	5.3

What Attracted Students to the Program?

Respondents answered the question “What attracted you to the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program?” They had the opportunity to choose as many of the options as they wanted. All respondents answered this question in the survey. The top three reasons were “program emphases” as the top reason, and “tuition cost” and “wanted a terminal master’s degree” were tied for the second most chosen reasons. Location was a common reason students chose the program. Interestingly, both respondents who wrote in the “other” open text option indicated that a reason was that the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) was not required.

Table 10. What attracted students to the program

Reason	# Responses
Program emphases	11
Tuition cost	10
Wanted a terminal master’s degree	10
Location	8
Faculty reputation	6
Internships	2
GRE not required (write-in)	2

What Are Skills Graduates Should Have?

The survey next asked students to think about the skill development that they understood to be embedded in the program. All of the respondents answered the following question: “In your opinion, what are the top five skills that students should have when they leave the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program?” They could select up to five options, including the “other” open-text option. The top two skills selected were critical thinking and qualitative research skills. Next were quantitative research methods and academic writing, followed by how to be a public sociologist. Professional skills development also received a large number of responses, but was not in the top five.

Table 11. Top five skills students believe they should learn from the program

Skill	# Responses
Qualitative research skills	15
Quantitative research methods	12
Academic writing	11
How to be a public sociologist	10
Professional skills development (CV, interviewing, etc.)	8
Public speaking and giving academic presentations	6
Critical thinking	5
Networking	5
Dispute resolution	3
Grant writing	3
Teaching skills (write-in)	1
Understanding of oppression and how we contribute	1

Given the opportunity for expand their response around the development of specific skills, fifteen respondents answered the question “What knowledge or skills do you wish you had an opportunity to develop (or develop further) in the program?” Some responses contained several suggestions, with sixteen total comments. Networking or teamwork was the top named skill, closely followed by skills around quantitative methods or programs, qualitative research, leadership, teaching, and technological or graphic design. There were five responses that called out specific classes they wish they had taken or had the opportunity to take. The top class mentioned was grant writing. The following table details the skills or knowledge noted by the respondents.

Table 12. Skills or knowledge students wish they had developed further in the program

Skill or knowledge	# Responses
Classes:	5 total
• Grant writing	2
• Conflict resolution	1
• Feminist sociology	1
• Social movements/social change	1
Skills:	16 total
• Networking	3
• Leadership	2
• Qualitative research	2
• Quantitative research	2
• Software, technological, website/graphic design	2
• Teaching	2
• Academic writing	1
• Better research opportunities/support	1
• How to be a public sociologist	1
• Presentation	1
• Publications	1

What Are the Strengths of the Program?

All respondents answered the question “What are the strengths of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program?” They could choose as many options as they wanted. “Small class sizes” was the top strength indicated; “applied research skills” was the second strength; “faculty” was the third strength selected. In the “other” option, two respondents wrote in comments around Meredith Williams being a strength of the program (Graduate Coordinator from 2014 to 2018).

Table 13. Strengths of the program

Strength	# Responses
Small class sizes	15
Applied research skills (e.g.: research methods, statistics)	13
Faculty	11
Program classes/emphases	8
Staff	5
Internships	2
Meredith Williams (write-in)	2

What Do Students Find Helpful During Their Time In the Program?

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with seven statements around the helpfulness of different resources or people during their time in the program. The resources and people they had to consider were their Committee Chair, the Department Staff, the Graduate Coordinator, the Graduate Student Handbook, their peers or cohort, their placement, and their teaching assistantship. All respondents answered the question. The majority of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that all seven resources and people listed were helpful to them. The Graduate Coordinator was the most helpful, while the Graduate Student Handbook had the most neutral responses.

Table 14. Helpfulness of resources during time in the program

Resource was helpful during time in program	Strongly or somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat or strongly disagree	n/a
My Committee Chair	15	2	1	-
The department staff	16	2	-	-
The Graduate Coordinator	17	-	1	-
The Graduate Student Handbook	8	9	1	-
My peers and/or cohort	14	-	4	-
My placement	11	2	-	5
My teaching assistantship	9	-	2	-

What Are the Barriers To Completing the Program?

Respondents were asked to choose the top three barriers to completing the HSU Public Sociology Program. Their top three could include a write-in option. The barriers listed fall into three categories. One category has to do a sense of community. Barriers in this category include lack of connection to the faculty or their peers and the location of the program in Humboldt. A second category includes barriers of a personal nature, such as health, family, or financial issues. A third category consists of barriers within the program itself. This includes the lack of connection with faculty again, steps required to complete the program, or unequal access to faculty.

The top two barriers identified were both in the personal category, with “personal issues” being the most common, and “financial barriers” being the second-most common. Together, “location” and “unequal access to faculty” were the third most common barrier. Five respondents chose to write in the “other” option. All of their comments fell into the existing categories of the pre-typed options, so I included them in the appropriate category. The following table details the categories of barriers encountered by students.

Table 15. Barriers to student completion of the program

Barrier	# Responses
Program:	21 total:
● Unequal access to faculty	7
● Lack of clarity of steps needed to complete the program	6
● Undependable faculty (write-in)	1
● Lack of support with thesis writing (write-in)	1
● “Red tape” required to graduate (write-in)	1
Personal:	20 total:
● Personal issues (family, health, etc.)	10
● Financial (tuition cost, personal expenses, etc.)	8
● Employment constraints (write-in)	1
● Challenge of completing a master’s program (write-in)	1
Community:	16 total:
● Location (culture shock, isolation, rural, etc.)	7
● Lack of connection with faculty	5
● Lack of connection with other graduate students	4

How Do Students Perceive Issues of Equity and Inclusion In the Program?

In order to understand how students perceive the program’s environment regarding issues that affect students of color and issues of equity and inclusion, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with four statements. They were asked to consider faculty awareness and support around issues that affect students of color, how their cohorts were able to reflect on issues of race and privilege, and if the curriculum robustly incorporated diverse voices and perspectives. All of the respondents answered the questions, and for all four statements, the majority of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. The only statement that elicited any neutral responses was the curriculum statement, with two neutral responses. The following table shows that overall respondents felt that there is a level of support for issues of diversity in the department.

Table 16. Perceptions around issues of equity and inclusion in the program

Statement	Strongly or somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat or strongly disagree	No response
The faculty of the program demonstrated awareness of issues that affect students of color.	16	-	2	-
The faculty of the program provided support around issues that affect students of color.	15	-	3	-
My cohort members were willing to reflect on issues of race and privilege.	16	-	2	-
I found the curriculum of the program robustly incorporated diverse voices and perspectives.	14	2	2	-

The respondents who answered that they somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statements around equity and inclusion tended to be from cohorts that began the program in 2012 to 2015 and left the program in 2016. While it would appear that the respondents who left the program in 2017 and 2018 felt more positive about issues of equity and inclusion in the program, there were two respondents who left the program in 2018 who somewhat disagreed that their cohort members were willing to reflect on issues of race and privilege and that the curriculum robustly incorporated diverse voices and perspectives.

Taking a closer look at the statements around the faculty and issues that affect students of color, the respondents were asked to compare how faculty *demonstrated awareness* of issues with how faculty *provided support* around those issues. While the majority either strongly or somewhat agreed with both statements, there was a small movement towards disagreement that faculty provided support around the issues, with smaller number of respondents strongly agreeing and one respondent somewhat disagreeing.

When comparing the gender and racial or ethnic identity of respondents with their level of agreement or disagreement, it is not possible to make generalizations about how one group tends to feel because of the small sample size and the relatively high number of respondents who declined to state their gender or racial or ethnic identity. However, within the majority group of respondents who strongly or somewhat agreed with the statements, the distribution of female, male, decline to state gender identity, white, non-white, and decline to state racial or ethnic identity generally reflects the makeup of the respondents overall. The small numbers of respondents in some level of disagreement are too small to make any generalizations. The following tables detail the gender identity and racial identity of the respondents who strongly or somewhat agreed to the statements around issues of equity and inclusion.

Table 17. Racial identity* of students who agreed the program supports issues of equity and inclusion

Statement	White	Non-white	Decline to state racial or ethnic identity
The faculty of the program demonstrated awareness of issues that affect students of color. (n=16)	9	4	3
The faculty of the program provided support around issues that affect students of color. (n=15)	9	4	3
My cohort members were willing to reflect on issues of race and privilege. (n=16)	8	5	3
I found the curriculum of the program robustly incorporated diverse voices and perspectives. (n=14)	7	4	3

**The respondents who identified in any one of the non-White categories have been combined into one category of "non-White" to maintain the anonymity of the respondents because of the small numbers of respondents.*

Table 18. Gender identity* of students who agree the program supports issues of equity and inclusion

Statement	Female	Male	Decline to state gender identity
The faculty of the program demonstrated awareness of issues that affect students of color. (n=16)	9	4	3
The faculty of the program provided support around issues that affect students of color. (n=15)	9	4	3
My cohort members were willing to reflect on issues of race and privilege. (n=16)	8	5	3
I found the curriculum of the program robustly incorporated diverse voices and perspectives. (n=14)	7	4	3

**None of the respondents chose the gender identification options of transgender or other (write-in).*

Respondents were given the opportunity to write in any other comments they had about issues of equity and inclusion in the program. Eleven respondents chose to write in additional thoughts. Most of the comments contain more than one topic, crossing over their ideas on faculty, their cohort, classes, and the program in general. For coding purposes, I separated the topics within one response, which resulted in 15 total comments.

Of the 15 total comments, five are positive, and ten are negative. Interestingly, the four positive comments are fairly general in nature and do not specify any particular topic. All 10 negative comments are specific in nature. For example, this positive comment is general in nature. “I felt that the program supported efforts of equity and inclusion,” whereas this negative comment is very specific in nature. “Hire more faculty of color.”

The topics of the write in comments fall into three categories: the cohort, the faculty, or the program. Often comments interrelate all three together, demonstrating how they intersect to affect the student’s experiences and perceptions. For example, cohort dynamics comments are tied to the program or faculty effectiveness at addressing issues of race, as demonstrated by this student’s comment:

> The cohorts are very white and often my cohort was still unwilling to always engage with their own oppressive behaviors and it didn’t seem like the teachers were always forceful enough in saying those behaviors weren’t okay. The teachers were always kind, which has its place, but it gets old as the semesters move forward.

The majority of comments address race. Race is called out specifically eight times. However, this could also have to do with the wording of the questions, as it seems that respondents assumed the questions around equity and inclusion were only about race. Only one respondent mentioned sexuality. “I don't have much to say about issues of equity and inclusion, but I am white and cisgender so I feel like these issues are harder for me to notice.” Another comment called out issues of disability. “I wish more of the faculty were aware of issues around disability and chronic illness.” One respondent also brought up the U.S.-centric approach to sociology in the program:

> I found that there was an overwhelming focus on US Sociology and what was going on in the US. However, an international approach or even analysis was missing from all of the courses. In order to inclusive and truly discuss issues of

> equity the course material itself needs to have at least a small sample of international analysis. The program is too heavily US based. I loved the program and this is my only critique.

In future surveys, it may help to include language around other topics, such as sexuality and abilities/disabilities to draw awareness to the wider realm of possible feedback the respondent may have.

Table 19. Positive or negative write-in comments around issues of equity and inclusion by topic

Topic	Comments about faculty	Comments about program	Comments about cohort
Race	4 negative	1 positive	2 negative
Other (not race)	1 negative	-	-
Not specified	1 positive 1 negative	3 positive	1

What Are Students' Perceptions of the Classes and Curriculum?

To assess the perceived value of the curriculum to the students, all the eleven classes of the program were listed, and the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement towards how beneficial each class was to their *education*. Then they were asked to repeat the process and evaluate how beneficial each class was to their *career*.

One trend that can be seen across the majority of the classes is that the students tend to agree that a class was more helpful for their education than their career. For example, if the majority of students strongly or somewhat agreed that a class was helpful for their education, there was a move of some numbers of responses towards somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, and infrequently, disagreement when the class was evaluated in terms of helpfulness to career.

One class where this can be seen is Community, Ecology, and Social Action. A total of 14 respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that the class was helpful to their education, and none disagreed. However, in terms of helpfulness to their career, eleven strongly agreed, no one somewhat agreed anymore, a few moved to a neutral stance, and two moved to disagree. Another class example is Quantitative Methods. A total of 17 respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the class was helpful to their education, yet fewer strongly agreed that it was helpful to their career.

Table 20. Community, Ecology, and Social Action: Benefit to education compared to career

This class was beneficial to my...	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Class not taken
Education	8	6	2	-	-	2
Career	11	-	5	-	2	-

Table 21. Quantitative Methods: Benefit to education compared to career

This class was beneficial to my...	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Class not taken
Education	11	6	-	-	1	-
Career	9	6	1	-	2	-

Respondents were then asked to list any additional classes taken as part of their graduate curriculum and how that class may have benefited them in their education and in their career. Grant Writing was the most popular additional class. All comments stated that all the classes were beneficial at some level for their education and career, with the exception of one class because it was cancelled during the semester.

Table 22. Additional classes taken as part of graduate curriculum

Class	# Responses
Grant writing	4
Community Action Research	2
Writing for films	1
Politics of Sustainability	1
Special Education	1
Writing for Change	1

An open write-in question was presented to give the respondents one final opportunity to make suggestions regarding the curriculum, “How could the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program strengthen the courses and curriculum of the program?” Fourteen respondents provided suggestions. The top two topics are around the theory classes and the race, gender, ethnicity class, each with two comments each. Both comments around the race class speak to the volume of material covered in the class: One student said, in relation to the Race, Ethnicity and Gender course: “Separate out issues of race/gender/class/ethnicity/orientation into their own classes - there’s just so much to cover in one crash course.” Another student commented, “I would have loved a full course on stigma and specialized groups.” There are eleven other topics covering a variety of issues, which range from specific feedback about a particular class to more general comments. For example, one student would have like to have the opportunity to publish articles worked into classes. Another student made a general comment about the applicability of the program after graduation:

> I really did enjoy a lot of the courses and curriculum, however being out in the real working world and seeing the reality of how hard it is to find a job has made me feel that the MA program could offer a variety of courses that can be applicable to the real working world. I value the critical perspective the program offered with the array of classes yet this seems to fall short when applying in the competitive job market that is not in academia.

This respondent's opinion about the applicability of the curriculum to non-academic jobs reflects the trend in the answers to the questions about how beneficial the classes were to their education as compared to their career. Although this is only one respondent who provided a write-in comment about the curriculum and the job market, this could be a potential area for consideration in the classes to link back skills and knowledge being learned to how they may be used in a job.

Education, Career, and Income - Post-Graduation

When asked about continuing their education after leaving the program, the majority of respondents stated they had continued (or were planning to continue) or that they were considering it. Of those who did (or were planning to) continue their education, the majority stated they would pursue a doctoral degree (PhD) in a variety of fields. The following table demonstrates the wide variety of fields alumni pursue.

Table 23. Degrees and fields former graduate students pursue

Degree type	# responses	Field
PhD	9	Sociology (3) Sociology or Public Policy Social Work (2) Medical Sociology or Criminal Justice Organizational Leadership International Sociology Human sexuality
M.A.	2	Social Work
M.Ed.	1	Education
Ed.D.	1	Education
M.S.	1	not indicated
PsyD	1	Psychology
K-12 teaching credential	1	not indicated

To further understand the career trajectories of the program's former students, the respondents were asked to provide their current job and salary. Twelve respondents were working at a variety of jobs, with seven of the eleven who provided their income information indicating they earned below $39,000 annually.

Table 24. Jobs and annual income ranges of former graduate students

Job	Annual Income Range in Dollars ($)
County social worker	40,000-59,000
Faculty support coordinator	40,000-59,000
Higher education administration	80,000-99,000
Manager of retail shop and volunteer grant writer for a nonprofit	Not indicated
Non-profit coordinator	20,000-39,000
Probation officer	20,000-39,000
Program coordinator for a non-profit	<20,000
Research	20,000-39,000
Retail	20,000-39,000
Student research assistant and store cashier	<20,000
Teacher	40,000-59,000
Teaching assistant	<20,000

Students' Last Thoughts

The respondents were given one last opportunity to add any other thoughts regarding the program in an open write-in question. Fifteen respondents chose to share additional feedback. The majority of the comments are around faculty teaching and support, with eight of the nine comments about faculty being positive feedback. Of the remaining comments, four are general positive comments about HSU and the program as a whole. One student stated, "Overall, the best experience of my life so far. The excellence of the program more than made up for the issues I had with the surrounding town." Two comments are negative, with one student giving feedback around the sense of community in the program, "The program could improve students' sense of belonging. The experience can be isolating, especially for students of color, and the program would occasionally perpetuate such separation."

While the small data set of the pilot survey makes it difficult to generalize the results, the respondents provided valuable feedback to the Public Sociology program that the faculty can review and make adjustments as possible. Going through the actual exercise of creating and administering the pilot survey provided valuable information to help understand how graduate student exit and alumni surveys can be effectively implemented as described in the literature. We will now look at what was learned and can be applied to future surveys.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE 2018 PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY GRADUATE PROGRAM EVALUATION SURVEY?

The Sociology exit and alumni survey was designed to be a pilot survey for the Sociology program specifically that they could continue to use over the years. We gained many insights that can help inform the creation of other surveys in the future. My observations fall into the following three categories: the respondents, the format or platform, and the design of the questions.

There are several things that I observed about the topic of respondents. The first topic is around contact lists. I experienced the same difficulties with compiling an accurate contact list that were documented in the literature. I obtained my working list from the department office and added to it using the "scavenger method." Looking back on it, I would recommend utilizing the Office of Institutional Data Request Process to obtain a comparison first working alumni contact list. That would have saved me a tremendous amount of time. However, depending on the quality of that list, I still may have had to use other methods to get more current email addresses.

The second topic in the category of respondents is around who should receive the survey. Because of the timing of our survey, it went to both exiting students and alumni. In retrospect, it would be more efficient to split the surveys up and send one to exiting students and another to alumni. This would simplify the survey in two ways. The questions could be more simply stated without having to cover both populations. Also, there would be less questions required to split out the populations and change the flow of the questions based on who they are, which would result in a shorter survey. Another aspect of who to send the surveys to is the decision to include former students who did not graduate. We chose to include them. While there was only one respondent who did not complete the program, they provided many suggestions and opinions that are valuable. I would recommend that alumni surveys include those students, if possible. They provide a different perspective that the program cannot obtain from those who graduated successfully. In terms of exit surveys, I would also suggest that they be administered to students who do not complete the program. The logistics of that process would be a bit more complicated but can produce important information.

My second group of observations are around the format and the platform of the survey. We used the free version of Google Forms to administer the survey. I would not recommend this platform. While it is completely valid and works, it is difficult to design questions in the free platform. This results in more conditional questions required, which means the survey is more clumsy and longer. It also does not allow the layout of the survey to be as streamlined or as professional as it could be. While we had distinct sections, they were created more to accommodate how the program worked. The survey layout would have been more cohesive and clear to the readers if the sections could have been created more to suit our needs, rather than to meet the limitations of the platform.

The third topic deals with the design of the questions. We had very good engagement from respondents to the questions. All respondents chose to answer all of the questions, and the majority of respondents provided comments in the write-in options of questions or in the open-ended questions. Of the 18 respondents, anywhere from 11 to 15 people would utilize the write-in spaces to give additional feedback. I would argue that this engagement in the survey can be attributed to the specific wording of the questions. As discussed in the literature, when questions are specific and topical to the reader, they are more likely to participate. If questions are written around organizational procedures and not relevant to the student experience, the less likely they are to participate (Boyer 2009). This would support the idea that even if a survey is centrally managed and administered, that it is important to enable programs to have input on the writing of questions, and to allow them to include program-specific questions in a central survey.

Now that we’ve looked at the actual surveys being used by different HSU graduate programs and what can be learned from them, we will turn back to the Graduate Coordinators. We now know the ways Graduate Coordinators thought surveys could be used and support they need to make them happen. They also shared many ideas and feedback about support they need to improve their efforts overall with their graduate programs. Although the needs expressed are not directly about exit or alumni surveys, they are closely related and cannot be ignored for successful implementation of any type of graduate student survey. We will now turn to the other needs and suggestions they had.

ADDITIONAL NEEDS AND FEEDBACK

The Challenges Graduate Programs Face at an Undergraduate University

One of the main topics that the majority of Graduate Coordinators discussed was the discrepancy in focus on graduate programs and undergraduate programs at HSU. While everyone acknowledged that an emphasis on undergraduate studies would be expected for a primarily undergraduate university, they still expressed frustration and disappointment at the lack of attention paid to graduate studies.

The feedback was that the lack of attention is a waste and detrimental to the university as a whole. Some Graduate Coordinators stated that it seemed that university administrators are simply unaware of what is happening around graduate studies and the validity of the work being done in graduate programs.

> We get very frustrated when we talk to administrators who are completely unaware of how much teaching the graduate students do. They need support, and they are not really getting it. My impression is that across campus, there are so many departments and institutions that are unaware of what graduate programs are doing.

Graduate Coordinators gave examples of the value that their graduate programs and graduate students provide to undergraduate programs and students. They felt that without this ongoing valuable resource, the university would not be as equipped to support undergraduates as well. For example, one Graduate Coordinator pointed out the great number of former graduate students who now teach at HSU. Those graduate student alumni provide an essential workforce. Another Graduate Coordinator made the point that without their graduate students, the needs of their undergraduate students could not be met. In their program, every graduate student works with a team of undergraduate students. Most of those undergraduate students would not have the chance to get that research experience if it were not for their graduate students. The faculty simply do not have the time to work with all the undergraduates at that level.

With the lack of awareness of graduate studies comes a lack of advocacy by the university administration. For example, some Graduate Coordinators pointed out that graduate programs are buried on the HSU website. With the lack of a presence of graduate studies in university communications and recruitment, some Graduate Coordinators have found that many undergraduates do not even realize they can stay at HSU for a graduate degree.

Graduate Coordinators stated that with the lack of resources put into the graduate programs, they are left on their own, especially around graduate student recruitment and retention. “[For undergraduates,] there’s a team of people looking at it from all angles. We don’t have that for graduate students.” With the limited time that Graduate Coordinators already have to do the rest of the activities required in the role, it is difficult to fit it all in. They have many ideas for ways to support graduate students and to improve structures, but the amount of labor for graduate coordinators is already so great, that those ideas get put on the backburner to make sure the fundamentals are taken care of first.

Some Graduate Coordinators commented on the negative impact on graduate student retention because the university is not weaving a web for consistency between the programs. They felt that the university has to take a role in creating bridges between silos. Without a concerted effort at the university level to do so, the result is more fragmentation and poor utilization of resources. Retention could be supported by creating a stronger graduate student and graduate program community at HSU. One Graduate Coordinator spoke of activities at HSU in the past.

> There was a sense of community among grad students beyond their cohorts. All grad programs would have a social once a year together. That hasn't happened in years. I would love to have a university-level effort to build a community around grad studies. It's an important part of campus. We are glad you are here. You are part of our community. Right now it must feel like an afterthought.

This type of activity is referred to in the literature as a way to improve graduate student retention.

Another Graduate Coordinator stated that the in order for the university to create cohesion and shared resources across programs and cohorts, they have to think about the graduate students as a particular population. For example, do they have different housing needs than undergraduate students? Could there be some summer housing that could be set aside for them where they could live with their families? Perhaps something like this could help to create a graduate student village that would help support them in their degree completion.

The desire for increased awareness and advocacy towards graduate studies that Graduate Coordinators expressed relates to the additional needs they expressed. We will take a look at some of those now.

What Other Ways Can the University Support Graduate Programs?

The majority of Graduate Coordinators expressed the need for support with marketing. As shown in the section on how programs would use information from alumni surveys, they realize the value of having alumni stories to share for both recruiting and retention purposes, as well as for alumni relations and fundraising. The "where are they now" is an important part of drawing attention to the accomplishments of programs at all levels. However, if programs do not have the skills or resources to do something with the information gathered from the surveys, then it just goes to waste. Graduate Coordinators expressed frustration with not having the long-term support in website and marketing design and maintenance.

The overwhelming ask was to have website and marketing help at a reasonable cost and the resources to get it done. Departments are responsible for taking care of their own website and marketing. They must fund any work out of their own budgets. They may hire other faculty or use in-house staff who have the skills and time to do the work, or they can hire Marcom. Graduate Coordinators recounted their struggles with having different staff or faculty members work on their sites, and not having the expertise to do so. Even if the college gives the department the template for the program website, the department may not have the technical expertise to produce something that is professional. Their other alternative is to hire Marcom to do the work, but many gave the feedback that Marcom is too expensive. Even though Marcom does good work, it does not help if programs have no money. Additionally, some stated that when they did hire Marcom, the styles of the artists can be different, and the work can take a long time because they are understaffed as well.

> From the university perspective as a whole, it would be much more effective and efficient to have Marcom do this, but not if they are going to charge market rate to departments who are scrambling for pennies. That doesn't compute…So who does Marcom work for, the university or themselves? There is a disconnect. They do really nice work; it's just expensive. They are running their little business inside this big bureaucracy. From my perspective, it looks like they are a for-profit within this not-for-profit entity, and that's challenging.

Aside from website support, Graduate Coordinators also stated that *any* support around marketing towards graduate programs would be extremely helpful. They gave suggestions of how the university could utilize existing platforms to promote awareness of graduate programs. For example, the existing HSU magazine could include features around graduate programs. Other Graduate Coordinators expressed how much they enjoyed receiving their newsletters from their alma maters, and how that would be a great way to showcase graduate studies.

The other need expressed was unrelated to marketing. One Graduate Coordinator stated that there is a need for a scientific writing course for graduate students. They have discussed this informally with other faculty and found that that students struggle with this. They would like something that could be taught for the sciences, since HSU does not have post-doctoral student mentors to help with those types of skills which are not developed intuitively.

Up to this point, we have heard how other scholars in the literature outline what successful assessment, including surveys, look like. While some HSU graduate programs are conducting graduate student surveys, we also have reviewed some of the challenges to making graduate student surveys a reality at HSU for all programs. We also gained some additional information from conducting the 2018 HSU Public Sociology Graduate

Program Evaluation Survey that can help to inform future work. From all these aspects of my research, I observed some themes that I will share with you before taking a look at recommendations from the research.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

My observations stem mostly from my conversations with the Graduate Coordinators and from trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together around graduate student survey activities at HSU. My observations fall into the following main topics: Graduate Coordinator challenges, the structure of graduate studies at HSU, and the challenges posed by being at an undergraduate focused university.

My first set of observations are around the challenges clearly expressed by the Graduate Coordinators. During my interviews with the Graduate Coordinators, I felt there was a genuine desire to be able to lead more activities and work around graduate student assessment. They were very generous with sharing their experiences and ideas, and were hopeful that something would come of my research to improve support and coordination around graduate student surveys. Most of the Graduate Coordinators wanted to be able to obtain more usable feedback from their graduate students, and more importantly, put that information to work for their programs to improve their curriculum, their learning outcomes, and the overall student experience.

The obstacle that came up over and over was the lack of time and resources to and all the issues that extend from that. How could they find the time or people resources to create and implement surveys, let alone maintain them year-to-year on a consistent basis? And what good would surveys do if they did not have the resources to do something with the information?

The same sentiment applied to activities around retention of graduate students, even from some of the programs that did not experience retention issues. As Graduate

Coordinators, they were aware that their roles also entailed not just the "maintenance" of existing graduate students, but also the recruitment and retention of them. The Graduate Coordinators realized that tools like exit and alumni surveys could not only improve their teaching and learning outcomes, but also increase student satisfaction, and in turn, positively affect retention. The literature documented the ways that creating community and connections for graduate students is tied to their retention, and the majority of Graduate Coordinators shared their wishes to be able to organize those types of activities for their students. But when? How? The time of the role of a Graduate Coordinator is really only sufficient to maintain the fundamentals of the program and attend to the immediate needs of their students.

This is where I observed some of the skepticism expressed by some of the Graduate Coordinators. Some of those who had been in their roles or working at HSU longer than others were pessimistic that anything would change. They had seen the various pendulum swings over the years and questioned things could improve, especially in the current era of budget cuts.

For all the Graduate Coordinators, whether they were expressing their skepticism or not, whether they had retention issues or not, and whether they were already using surveys or not, they all expressed their desire for more university support to enable them and their programs to perform survey and retention activities with their graduate students. This extended to the support needed from the university to not only conduct those activities, but also to follow up on them and put any learnings to use to affect their programs.

My second set of observations are around the structure of graduate studies at HSU. Part of the structural challenge seems to me to be a lack of coordination and collaboration between all the graduate programs together. In speaking with the Graduate Coordinators and attending a Graduate Council meeting, it appeared to me that while some of the programs collaborate together, their collaboration is initiated on their own out of a common interest or need. Although they are all under the umbrella of HSU Graduate Studies, there did not seem to be a connectedness or network between all the programs that is created and promoted at the university level. Often Graduate Coordinators were surprised to learn what other programs were doing around graduate student outreach or surveys. They were also surprised to learn about what others dealt with around recruiting or retention. At the same time, they were very interested in these topics and many of them expressed the desire to have more dialogue together about these types of things. Even those who did not have recruitment or retention challenges said they would like to learn what others are doing and share ideas together.

Again, the main obstacle is time. With all the job duties they have, Graduate Coordinators are challenged to find the time to reach out and collaborate together even if they want to. And while the monthly Graduate Council meeting is one venue where Graduate Coordinators come together, it seemed as though there needed to be something to connect all the programs together that is more integrated into the overall university structure and into the way Graduate Studies conducts business. It is as if there needs to be support from the university for a *community* to be built around Graduate Coordinators.

Another obstacle to more collaboration between graduate programs that I observed is the lack of institutional knowledge and consistency in place to support the Graduate Coordinators in their role. This is directly related to the need for more support at the university level for the role of Graduate Coordinator. While some of the Graduate Coordinators had been in their role for many years, some were new to the role and even their job at HSU. One was in the role as an interim for one year. Every graduate program was operating on their own, and even some concentrations within the same program function like their own miniature graduate programs. Graduate Coordinators reported that they had not gone through any type of “training” or “orientation” for the role, and took the role over from whoever had been in it before, with whatever tools or resources that person had transferred to them. For some, this was more helpful than for others. But for all, it was based on the program and the previous Graduate Coordinator’s information and experience. There was no “formal” guidance provided by Graduate Studies or the university. Often that meant starting something from scratch. While sometimes that was good and they could start fresh, it was inefficient and often a hunt for information throughout the year. Due to time and resource constraints, combined with lack of structure and support at the university level, graduate programs and Graduate Coordinators seem to default to working independently, whether they wanted to or not.

Functioning as a program alone without much collaboration with other programs can sometimes be easier in the short-run. A program can get things done, like a graduate student survey, without having to check with other programs or any overseeing office. In some ways, it can give them more flexibility. This is a concern especially if a program sees itself as very different from all other programs, and that their graduate students have distinctly unique needs that are unlike other programs' graduate students. This is another of my observations about the structure of graduate studies at HSU. Graduate Coordinators tended to describe their program as very unique from all the other programs, with very different needs. While I did hear and I have witnessed the distinctness between them, and I do believe different programs attract different types of students with different needs, I also think that there are many fundamental commonalities between programs.

These commonalities are especially demonstrated through the Graduate Coordinator interviews and the types of information their programs wanted to learn from graduate student exit and alumni surveys, how they wanted to use the information, and the challenges they experience in making it all happen. Part of me wonders if the perception of uniqueness of needs (and therefore support) is fueled by the lack of community structure provided by the university around the graduate programs and the Graduate Coordinators. Ideally, it seems like as though there could be a way to create that community and structure to support programs, while maintaining the flexibility they want that would enable them to still meet those unique needs without feeling stifled or suppressed.

My speculation is that part of the reason for the lack of structure around the graduate programs that results in a lack of cohesiveness is due to the challenge posed by the fact that they are exist at an undergraduate-focus university. Again, the Graduate Coordinators who spoke of the challenge acknowledged that the California State

University system is primarily an undergraduate institution. However, knowing how strong and pervasive the graduate programs are throughout HSU, it was surprising to me to hear my questions reinforced by the Graduate Coordinators in their interviews. As they expressed, graduate studies seemed like an afterthought, an add-on, to undergraduate studies. They were pretty much left to their own devices for everything, in their opinions. During my hunt for people and links on the HSU website for my research, it was challenging to locate or identify the graduate resources in a succinct way. The HSU website does not give any immediate indication that there is a strong graduate studies presence at the university. Furthermore, each department and each program had their own website design and way of listing who the Graduate Coordinator was. It was not as intuitive as I thought it would be. I have not witnessed many materials that really draw attention to graduate studies at HSU, whether that be through alumni fundraising, marketing, or news.

Looking back on my own experiences over the years in Humboldt County and at HSU, I can think of many ways this pattern of undergraduate focus at the expense of graduate studies comes up. As discussed in the literature, there were many resources and support systems in place for me as an undergraduate in the 1990s, and I have witnessed a great many more put into place since I graduated. Between the times when I graduated with my bachelor's degree and when I was deep into my master's program, I worked with different community organizations and the HSU Office of Diversity and Inclusion (now the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) on projects around student retention and making Humboldt a more welcoming place for students of color. Even those projects were all focused on undergraduates. The “unconscious exclusion” of graduate students was happening, and I did not realize it. Now, as a graduate student returning after many years, I definitely experienced some of the situations discussed in the literature. For me, the accessibility of the program (or inaccessibility) was all about scheduling around my work and family. Since I reside in Humboldt and already have my local community, I did not experience the isolation that is described. However, I can see how that could happen very easily for graduate students who come from out of the area just for their program. While I was not actively seeking a graduate student community, I can say that when there was bonding and sharing within my cohorts and between students of other related graduate programs, it was indeed very rewarding. Not only did those interactions and feeling of community definitely help me get through the program, I also learned a lot from those other students. I think I would have enjoyed more sharing across programs, and would have appreciated something in place at the university level to promote that type of activity.

The recommendations that I make in the next section are based in part on my own observations in conjunction with the recommendations in the literature, the Graduate Coordinators’ viewpoints, and what was learned from conducting the pilot Sociology survey. We will now wrap up the information from my research and look at potential areas for development for graduate programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature outlined how student feedback surveys can be powerful assessment tools, especially when implemented effectively. I would argue that the idea presented in the literature around the importance of approaching assessment from a holistic perspective includes student feedback surveys.

First, I would recommend that graduate student exit and alumni surveys be managed centrally at the university level, rather than each program managing their own. This would mean that there would need to be resources allocated to this type of work at the university level. As expressed by many of the Graduate Coordinators, they struggle with making this type of effort happen within the limits of their time and their programs' resources. While the HSU Office of Graduate Studies was very supportive of this type of work and very eager to begin, they also would need additional resources to manage the process. Each of the offices that I spoke with stated that they did not have the resources to take this type of work from beginning to end. In the long run, it would be a much more efficient use of resources if surveys were managed from a central resource. Additionally, this would provide a level of institutional memory for the process. If a documented and systematic process was in place, managed by a central office, the process could continue even when faculty, staff, and administrators move into new roles. Finally, there would also be a mechanism for institutional knowledge to be shared over time. If the information from the surveys could then be housed centrally, it would be retained and accessible in such a way that different programs and areas could use the information as a resource. There could also be valuable sharing of ideas between graduate programs.

For HSU to implement graduate student exit and alumni surveys, it is even more important to consider a holistic approach, as there are not as many resources for graduate studies as undergraduate studies. For graduate student surveys to be successful at HSU, a thoughtful and long-term approach must be taken to give the idea and the proposal the best chance to gain support and resources. A thoughtful and long-term approach involves not seeing exit and alumni surveys as standalone tools that represent snapshots in time to be used only by graduate programs and the Office of Graduate Studies. The surveys should be thought of as more than just providing information about the past. They need to be seen as providing information around one point in the overall life of a student. They should be thought of in terms of how they could fit in with informing the phases of recruiting prospective students, admitting new students, keeping in touch with current students, hearing the feedback of students at the end of their program, and finally, reaching out to people post-graduation for new reflections. Even if all those pieces are not in place at the university level at the time, thinking with that type of vision while planning will help guide the creation of surveys that have that type of future value. With this type of perspective, those who may design the processes and the surveys will have a completely different approach to making them happen.

Ideally, the approach would allow for time for the planning of the surveys. Trying to implement something without documenting the long-term strategy of the process may only result in ineffective surveys being sent out, surveying students and alumni unnecessarily, and gathering meaningless data. Instead, if the process is allowed to be thoughtful, there is more chance for the collaboration and communication between all key stakeholders needed for success.

The collaboration and communication aspects of graduate student surveys are needed throughout every stage of the process: from the design of the process and surveys, all the way through to the feedback process. I would recommend that graduate students (and/or former graduate students) be included as key stakeholders in the discussions in addition to Graduate Coordinators. Some key stakeholders may include offices such as the Office of Graduate Studies, Alumni and Engagement, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, the Office of Admissions, the Academic and Career Advising Center, and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The list of key stakeholders should be open to review in case there are areas that have been missed prior to the first meeting. If many different areas are included in the discussion, they may be able to find value in the content of the surveys for their area. This may lend weight to graduate student surveys (and graduate student assessment activities), which in turn may give the proposal and processes a better chance of gaining ongoing support and resources. There is less chance of the surveys becoming unimportant over time if more areas find value in the data. As shared by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, if the surveys are an institutional priority, there can be more support for them. The risk of pushing out surveys without taking the time to involve all the key stakeholders and thinking through the process from beginning to end is producing a mediocre result that is of little value. This would only reinforce the “add-on” perception of graduate programs. Instead, if done well, the process and surveys could help garner more focus on graduate studies, and hopefully, increased advocacy as well.

The collaborative process must extend to all phases of the survey cycle. This includes where the resources would come from, the design of the survey, how the survey would be administered, how the data would be analyzed and by whom, how graduate programs would have access to the information and get their results, how the results would be shared with other areas of the university and the wider student and alumni community, to who is responsible for actions taken as a result of what is learned. Then, there always needs to be room for feedback from stakeholders after each cycle of surveys and adjustments made as deemed fit.

The design of the survey is a key phase of the planning. As expressed by the Graduate Coordinators and as described in the literature, there is a definite need for individual programs to have specific questions that they can choose and include on a centralized survey. The risk of not allowing enough individuality to a centralized survey is the programs will not obtain the information they need from the survey and may end up conducting their own surveys. This could result in bothering alumni with multiple surveys and diminishing the effectiveness of any one survey. A survey could be designed to have a set of questions that would benefit all programs and interests first, then depending on the respondent’s program, the survey would automatically direct to the program-specific questions. Keeping the length of the survey in mind, there could be a bank of questions that programs could choose for the survey. To compose this bank of questions, Graduate Coordinators could provide examples of questions that would be helpful for their programs, and a committee could compare and compile the questions. After reviews and edits, a final list would be available to choose from. This would allow consistency for the survey analysis and the ability to compare results across survey cycles. This may mean that there is a large bank of questions from which a program chooses a limited number of questions. The benefit here is that the programs have more ownership in the process, and the questions are more useful for them. As one Graduate Coordinator expressed, their fear was that if a survey was centralized, it might not be as useful for them. The goal would be to make any survey positioned to obtain truly useful information for the programs. An additional benefit to giving the programs a voice in the design of the survey and all questions is that the topics of the questions will also have more saliency to the respondents. As discussed in the literature, if survey questions are more interesting and directly applicable to the respondent, they are more likely to participate, which will result in higher response rates.

Centralized surveys could also provide flexibility in the methods of administering the survey or sending follow-up reminders to students or alumni. It should be considered that different programs might want to have a survey email have their faculty send it out. Other programs might choose to have the initial survey invitation sent by a central office, but they want to be responsible for sending out their own subsequent reminder communications. The common goal is to elicit the best response rates and the most candid answers possible. There may be different combinations of methods that could achieve that and still maintain the structure of the standardized process and schedule.

Lastly, the plan for how the feedback will be processed and communicated back is crucial. The plan for closing the loop must be discussed and the plan must be documented before implementing the survey. Without the feedback loop being thought out prior to implementation, there is the risk of the data going to waste and no action taken from what could be learned. The ideal scenario is that the results of the surveys and what actions are going to be taken or not would be communicated to not only current and former students, but also the community at large. This could be done by posting the information on the university website, posting the news on social media, publishing information in the university magazine, or sending out a campus-wide email from administration. Key stakeholders may come up with other innovative ways of communicating the information. By making public the feedback results and the action plan to the community, it will make a statement that graduate studies have importance at the university. It will also communicate to the community that the university cares about their feedback, and they may be more likely to give feedback or become involved in the future.

From here, my recommendations are around the other needs that Graduate Coordinators expressed stemming from their thoughts around surveys. Clearly, there are benefits for many levels of the university if graduate student exit and alumni surveys can be executed successfully. However, as expressed by many of the Graduate Coordinators, they cannot put the information from alumni surveys to work for them from a marketing and recruiting perspective if they do not have the resources to do so. The current state of each department left to their own devices of finding someone with the skills to help with their websites, such as sharing alumni stories, seems to be creating inconsistency among the programs. I would argue that the inconsistency in the look and feel of the graduate programs on their websites is not appealing from a recruiting perspective, and also adds to the perception of graduate programs being an “add-on” to undergraduate programs at HSU. There is a need for some type of centralized support for the programs and departments that is not at a cost they simply cannot afford.

This leads to my last recommendation. There is the need for more centralized support overall for graduate programs to help create a graduate community. Of course, this would require increased advocacy for graduate programs at the university level. This community may come in different forms.

First, there is the community of Graduate Coordinators. Their time is very limited, and it can be difficult for them to find the time to collaborate with other programs and learn from them at the level that some would like. In addition to the current monthly Graduate Council meetings, the university could promote and provide opportunities for collaboration across programs. Additionally, there could be distinct and documented processes and structure for Graduate Coordinators. This institutional knowledge for people coming into their role could include “training” to help get them up to speed on what resources are available to them, access to different data (for example, survey data), or who is doing what across campus. It could also contribute to the sense of community between Graduate Coordinators.

Second, there is the community of graduate students. As described in the literature and expressed by some Graduate Coordinators, graduate students are a unique population that have different needs than undergraduates. These needs may range from housing needs to how to help connect students together. A university that recognizes these questions and puts structures into place to support them differently may help to recruit and retain graduate students more successfully. For example, the university could create opportunities for cohorts from different programs to share time and ideas together. Some events or communications may include alumni from across programs.

While some of these recommendations are more long-term and may require more resources, others can be accomplished with some small steps and efforts that are fueled by existing resources. What draws the recommendations all together is the fact that the graduate programs at HSU can benefit from additional attention at the university level. This may come at different levels. One of those levels would be to support the implementation of centralized exit and alumni surveys with the time and resources necessary to do it successfully. Surveys could help to provide data in support of the value that graduate programs provide to the university overall. Another level would be to provide resources to assist programs with marketing for recruiting purposes. And lastly, the broadest level, would be to support mechanisms to foster a more connected graduate community. Graduate programs at HSU are strong and provide a level of depth to the university that are overshadowed by the focus on undergraduate programs. By supporting graduate programs at some of these different levels on a consistent basis, the university can help support graduate studies to be a healthy and thriving part of the institution as a whole.

For any of these levels of support, considering graduate students as key stakeholders in the discussions could greatly enhance the outcomes. Graduate students are making the institutional commitment when they come into a graduate program, and in turn, the university can explore different ways to fulfill upon the commitment back to them, based on what they say they need to be successful. For the scholarship of teaching and learning to be truly taken to heart, it is important to not only *ask* graduate students for their feedback, but also *listen* closely to that feedback and *act* upon it.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – 2018 HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey

2018 Humboldt State University (HSU) Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey

1. This survey will allow the department to reflect on the quality of our program, and will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary and with minimal risk. If you are uncomfortable or unwilling to answer any of the questions, you may skip that question, or discontinue the survey at any time. While we do not anticipate these questions will cause undue stress, you may find benefits in reflecting on your experiences, and contributing to understandings of the experiences of students of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program. Although there will not be any compensation, your contributions may benefit student success efforts in the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program and beyond. Every effort will be taken to keep your identity anonymous. We will not connect your responses to any identifying information about you. Information acquired from this interview may be presented in classrooms, journals, presentations, publications, and online, but will not be connected to your name. In the analysis and reporting of any information linked to this research, all identifying information will be removed. If you have any concerns or questions, you may contact the principal investigator: Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt at jennifer.eichstedt@humboldt.edu or (707)826-4949. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (707) 826-5165, irb@humboldt.edu, or access their website at http://www2.humboldt.edu/irb/index.php. Thank you for taking the time to provide us information on your experiences in the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program. <checkboxes, required>
    - I am at least 18 years old, and I understand the above and consent to participate in this research. <Skip to question 2>
    - I am either not at least 18 years old, or I do not consent to participate in this research.<skip to exit survey screen>

Exit survey
<This section will only display if the participant responds that they are not 18 or do not consent>
Please click the "submit" button to exit the survey. Thank you.

Participation in the program

2. What year did you start the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? <short answer text>

3. What year did you (or will you) graduate from or leave the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? <drop down>
    - 2016
    - 2017
    - 2018
4. Did you attend (or are you attending) as a full or part time student? <drop down>
    - Full time student
    - Part time student
5. Did you (or will you) complete the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? <drop down>
    - Yes <skip to #6>
    - No <skip to #7>

Completion of the program (or projected completion)

6. How many semesters did it take you (or will it take for you) to complete your degree? <drop down>

- 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Semesters in the program

7. How many semesters did you attend classes in the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? <drop down>

- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Your experiences in the program

8. What was (or is) your emphasis in the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? Please check all that apply. <check boxes>
    - Practicing Sociology
    - Teaching Sociology

9. What attracted you to the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? Please check all that apply.
    - Faculty reputation
    - Internships
    - Location
    - Program emphases
    - Tuition cost
    - Wanted a terminal master's degree
    - Other (write in)

10. In your opinion, what are the top five skills that students should have when they leave the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program:
    - Academic writing

- Critical thinking
- Dispute resolution
- Grant writing
- How to be a public sociologist
- Networking
- Professional Skills Development (CV, interviewing, etc.)
- Public speaking and giving academic presentations
- Qualitative research skills
- Quantitative research methods
- Other (write in)

11. What knowledge, or skills, do you wish you had an opportunity to develop (or develop further) in the program? <open text write in>

12. What are the strengths of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? Please check all that apply.
    - Applied research skills (e.g.: research methods, statistics)
    - Faculty
    - Internships
    - Program classes/emphases
    - Small class sizes
    - Staff
    - Other <open text>

13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
My Committee Chair was helpful to me during my time in the program.						
The Department Staff were helpful to me during my time in the program.						

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
The Graduate Coordinator was helpful to me during my time in the program.						
The Graduate Student Handbook was helpful to me during the program.						
My peers and/or cohort were helpful to me during my time in the program.						
My placement was helpful to me during my time in the program.						
My teaching assistantship was helpful to me during my time in the program.						

14. In your opinion, what are the top three barriers to student completion of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program?
    - Financial barriers (tuition cost, personal expenses, etc.)
    - Lack of connection with other graduate students
    - Lack of connection with faculty
    - Lack of clarity of steps needed to complete the program
    - Location (culture shock, isolation, rural, etc.)
    - Personal issues (family, health, etc.)

- Unequal access to faculty (selective mentoring, cherry picking, etc.)
- Other <open text>

15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
The faculty of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program demonstrated awareness of issues that affect students of color.						
The faculty of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program provided support around issues that affect students of color.						
My cohort members were willing to reflect on issues of race and privilege.						
I found the curriculum of the program (e.g.: texts, articles, etc.) robustly incorporated diverse voices and perspectives.						

16. What other comments do you have about issues of equity and inclusion in the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program?

17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "This class was beneficial to my graduate level EDUCATION."

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Class not taken
Community, Ecology, and Social Action						
Dispute Resolution						
Individual and Society						
Practicing Sociology						
Proseminar (Professional Development Seminar)						
Qualitative Methods						
Quantitative Methods						
Race, Ethnicity, and Gender						
Social Structure						
Social Theory						
Teaching Sociology						

18. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "This class was beneficial to my graduate level CAREER."

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Class not taken
Community, Ecology, and Social Action						

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Class not taken
Dispute Resolution						
Individual and Society						
Practicing Sociology						
Proseminar (Professional Development Seminar)						
Qualitative Methods						
Quantitative Methods						
Race, Ethnicity, and Gender						
Social Structure						
Social Theory						
Teaching Sociology						

19. Did you take any classes as part of your graduate curriculum, other than those listed above?
    - Yes <if yes, skips to #20>
    - No <if no, skips to #23>

Additional classes taken as part of graduate curriculum

20. Please list any classes you took as part of your graduate curriculum other than those listed above. <open text>

21. Please describe if you think the additional classes were beneficial to your GRADUATE EDUCATION, and explain why or why not. <open text>

22. Please describe if you think the additional classes were beneficial to your CAREER, and explain why or why not. <open text>

Strengthening the program

23. How could the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program strengthen the courses and curriculum of the program? <open text>

24. After leaving the HSU Sociology Graduate Program, did you (or are you planning to) continue your education?
- Yes <skip to #25>
- No <skip to #27>
- Maybe

Further education
25. What type of degree (e.g. PhD, JD, MA, etc.) will you pursue? <write in open text>
26. In what field will you continue your education? <write in open text>

Employment
27. Are you currently working?
- Yes <go to #28>
- No <skip to Demographics section>

Employment and income
28. What is (or are) your current job(s)?
29. What is your current annual income?
- No current Income or unemployed
- Less than $20,000
- $20,000-$39,000
- $40,000-$59,000
- $60,000-$79,000
- $80,000-$99,000
- $100,000-$120,000
- Greater than $120,000

Demographics
We will make sure that demographic information is not released in a way that allows for the identification of any individual. For instance, if we find a correlation between women answering questions a particular way, versus men, we will note this difference in an aggregated manner; similarly, with race we will ensure the aggregation of data so that no person may be identified by their experiences or comments. Thank you.

30. What is your gender identity? Choose as many as apply.
- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Decline to state
- Other <write in open text>
-

31. What is your racial/ethnic identity?
- Latinx
- Black
- White
- Asian American
- Native/Indian/Indigenous
- Decline to state
- Other <write in open text>

Additional comments
Please take this opportunity to provide additional feedback about the program, including those areas of importance to you that we did not address in this survey.

32. What additional comments do you have about the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program? <open text write in>

Thank you.
Thank you for your participation in the 2018 HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey. Your feedback will help understandings of the experiences of students of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program, and may benefit student success efforts in the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program and beyond.

If you are interested in FUTURE CONNECTIONS through the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program, including providing mentorship/internship opportunities, receiving communications from the department, and connecting with former students of the program, please provide your contact information by clicking the link that will be presented after you submit your survey. Your contact information will be collected separately from your survey answers, and will not be connected to the data in any way. Thank you.

Please click "submit" to complete the survey. Thank you.

<If the participant clicks on the link presented in the exit screen, they will be taken to a separate Google Form with a separate URL to gather their contact information.>

2018 Humboldt State University (HSU) Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey - Contact Information

33. If you are interested in future connections through the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program, including providing mentorship/internship opportunities, receiving communications from the department, and connecting with former students of the program, please continue to provide your contact information. Your contact information

will be collected separately from your survey answers, and will not be connected to the data in any way. Thank you.

Please provide your name, mailing address, email address, and phone number.
<open text>

Appendix B - Example Email to Participate in 2018 HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey

Dear Former Student of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program,

The Humboldt State University (HSU) Public Sociology Graduate Program is committed to the retention and graduation of its students. Understanding the experiences of former graduate students is a key way the Department of Sociology can identify ways the program can be improved to support future graduate students.

My name is Alison Hong-Novotney, and I am a current graduate student in the Department of Sociology's MA program. I am researching the experiences of former students of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program towards the completion of my master's degree.

I am asking for your feedback and opinions as part of the *2018 HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey*. This survey will allow the department to reflect on the quality of the program and understand how to better meet the needs of graduate students. Because you are former student of the program, I would appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts with me. Your anonymous participation is optional, and your answers will be kept confidential. Your answers will not be connected to any identifiable information about you.

To participate in the survey (about 15 minutes), please use the link below. The survey will close on *June 8, 2018 at midnight.*

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeaPqlIAValvt2_41YFZ92HPQEuo8U0K9InTgMCM4h92skNqw/viewform

Your contributions to this study will help me to understand how the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program is serving and supporting its students in a way that helps them to be successful in their college careers, and after.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

If you have any concerns or questions, you may contact the principal investigator: Alison Hong-Novotney, at awh3@humboldt.edu or my graduate committee chair, Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt, at jennifer.eichstedt@humboldt.edu or (707)826-4949. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (707) 826-5165, irb@humboldt.edu, or access their website at http://www2.humboldt.edu/irb/index.php.

Appendix C – HSU Graduate Coordinator Interview Guide

Humboldt State University (HSU) Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Interview Questions for Graduate Coordinators

Name:
Program:
How long have you been the graduate coordinator?

Does your department currently use -or- has your department ever used a graduate student exit survey?

a. **No, department has never used a graduate student survey:**
- Why not?
- Is this something that you would be interested in doing in the future?
    - If yes, does your department have any interest in having another university department or office manage the process for your department, or would your department rather do it in-house?
- What other ways does your department connect with graduate alumni or students who participated in the graduate program but may not have graduated? (newsletter/informal emails?)
- What would your ideal scenario look like for graduate student outreach?
- What else would you like to add about graduate student retention?
- Complete interview.

2. **No, but our department has used one in the past:**
- Why did your department stop?
- Why isn't your department using one currently?
- What prevents you from doing an exit survey for graduate students?
- Is your department interested in using another survey in the future?
    - If yes, does your department have any interest in having another university department or office manage the process for your department, or would your department rather do it in-house?
- What other ways does your department connect with graduate alumni or students who participated in the graduate program but may not have graduated? (newsletter/informal emails?)
- <Go to yes flow>

3. **Yes, our department uses/has used a graduate student exit survey.**

    a. When did your department begin using a survey (survey used for how long)?
    b. The who/what/when/why questions (higher priority questions):

    - Who is/was surveyed? (Only those graduated? Or also those who left for other reasons?)
    - When does/did your department conduct the survey? For example, what was the timeline?
    - What kind of information is/was asked in the survey?
    - What are/were the goals of conducting the survey? (fundraising? mentorship?)
- What does/did your department do with the information (How does your department use the information)?
- What other ways does your department connect with graduate alumni or students who participated in the program but may not have graduated (newsletters/informal emails)?
- What would your ideal scenario look like for graduate student outreach?

c. The logistics:

- How does/did your department execute the survey? (logistically… in-house or centralized, google/survey monkey/ etc...)
    - If your department manages/managed the survey in-house:
        - Why not through a centralized university office (such Forever Humboldt)?
        - Does your department have any interest in having another university department or office manage the survey process for your department, or does your department prefer to keep it managed in house?

- How does/did your department store and access the information? Who accesses/uses the information?

Appendix D - HSU Graduate Coordinator Interview Informed Consent

2018 HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey
Informed Consent Form - Interview for Graduate Coordinators

You are asked to participate in an interview as a graduate coordinator about your department's efforts to reach out to or conduct an exit survey for former graduate students of the program. This research is part of ongoing work of the HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program to understand graduate student retention, as well as graduate student exit survey practices on campus, and how it might align with those. The research is being conducted by Alison Hong-Novotney, a graduate student in the HSU Public Sociology Master's Degree program, toward completion of a master's degree. The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes to complete, and will be recorded for transcription.

Your participation is voluntary and with minimal risk. If you are uncomfortable or unwilling to answer any of the questions, you may skip that question, or discontinue the interview at any time. While I do not anticipate these questions will cause undue stress, you may find benefits in talking and reflecting on your experiences, and contributing to campus understandings of graduate student retention. Although there will not be any compensation, your contributions may benefit graduate student success efforts at HSU and beyond.

Your responses as the graduate coordinator of your department will not be confidential. Information acquired from this interview may be presented in classrooms, journals, presentations, publications, and online, but will not be connected to your name; however, it may be connected to your department. In the analysis and reporting of any information linked to this research, your name will be removed.

If you have any concerns or questions, you may contact the principal investigator: Alison Hong-Novotney, at awh3@humboldt.edu, or the graduate committee chair, Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt, at jennifer.eichstedt@humboldt.edu or (707)826-4949. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (707) 826-5165, irb@humboldt.edu, or access their website at http://www2.humboldt.edu/irb/index.php.

Thank you for taking the time to provide information on your department's efforts around graduate student retention and outreach.
***

I am at least 18 years old. I understand the above and consent to participate in this research.

Print name: ____

Signature: _______________________________________ Date:________________

Appendix E - HSU Business Administration Master's Program 2018 Exit Survey Instrument

School of Business

Humboldt State University

Exit Survey of Graduating MBA students

Introduction and Purpose:

As part of our continuing efforts to improve the degree programs in the School of Business, we are interested in your candid assessments

This Exit Survey of Graduating MBA students is an important tool in our outcomes assessment program, and it provides valuable data and information that will be used to identify areas where changes and improvements are needed.

Survey Composition:

The survey is composed of the following two parts:

Part I: Assessment of Student Learning in Masters of Business Administration.
Part II: Open ended feedback about Business Program.

General Instructions:

1. Please note that all responses will be treated **confidentially** and **anonymously (**students will not be identified individually). The results will only be displayed in aggregate terms.

2. Please give careful consideration to all of the survey items and **provide thoughtful, candid, and accurate** responses to each of the applicable items.

3. For each survey item, please provide specific comments and suggestions for changes and improvements, **particularly in areas where you believe the learning goals were not achieved.**

PART I: ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IN THE MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

The School of Business has identified several **intended student learning outcomes** that it expects students to have achieved upon completion of the Master of Business Administration. For each of the following intended learning outcomes, mark the box in the rating scale that most closely corresponds to your assessment of the degree to which you believe that you have been successful in achieving that outcome, and **please provide comments and suggestions for changes and improvements:**

First Indirect Measure: Program Goals

1. I am able to make a persuasive business case for long term strategic sustainability.

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

2. I am able to demonstrate effective analytical skills based on a comprehensive application of statistical, accounting or finance skills

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

3. I am well prepared to write effectively.

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

4. I have learned, in this program, to make an effective presentation to a live audience.

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery

5. I am able to work effectively in a team environment.

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

6. I am better able to engage in persuasive ethical reasoning in a business situation due to my classes in this program.

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

7. I am able to apply strategic business concepts as a result of this program.

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

8. I am able to apply sustainability to the environment and social responsibility in a business environment as a result of this program.

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Emerging	3. Satisfactory	4. Partial Mastery	5. Mastery
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

Second Indirect Measure: Overall Satisfaction with the Program

Overall my personal experience with the MBA program has been:

1.Unsatisfactory	2. Satisfactory	3. Okay	4. Very Satisfactory	5. Excellent
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:				

PART II: QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK ABOUT PROGRAM

Please provide detailed feedback for each of the questions.
Mark all that apply

1. Please list the Top 3 teaching methods in this program that were most effective for you.
   a. Cases
   b. Group projects
   c. Lecture
   d. Videos
   e. Guest speakers
   f. Problem examples
   g. Other: Please describe: ______________________________

   ____
2. Briefly describe teaching methods that were ineffective for you.
3. Do you believe that the program was challenging/ rigorous? Please provide rationale.
4. What aspect(s)/ techniques or interactions with faculty or members of your cohort of your degree program were you the most satisfied? Please provide rationale.

5. What aspect(s) of your degree program were you the least satisfied? Please provide rationale and suggest specific improvements that we could make.

6. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
"Courses that I took at HSU MBA program helped me learn the tools, techniques and strategies for designing and operating socially and environmentally business/organization".
(Circle one).

a. Strongly agree.
b. Somewhat agree.
c. Neither agree nor disagree.
d. Somewhat disagree.
e. Strongly disagree.

7. Has the MBA program better prepared you to achieve your life or career goals?

a. Strongly agree.
b. Somewhat agree.
c. Neither agree nor disagree.
d. Somewhat disagree.
e. Strongly disagree.

8. What are your immediate career plans?

9. Any other Comments/Suggestions:

Thank you very much for your assistance in this important process of outcomes assessment. The valuable input that you provided will help us to improve the MBA program.

Appendix F - HSU Environment and Community Master's Program 2018 Exit Survey Instrument

Environment and Community Program Graduate Exit Survey

1. Seminar Course Offerings and Electives

1. Which E&C seminar courses did you take?

2. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding your overall experience with the E&C seminars.

	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Agree Strongly
The seminars contained sufficient breadth and variety of subject material.	○	○	○	○	○
The seminars complemented one another, helping to integrate knowledge of environment and community.	○	○	○	○	○
E&C seminars were helpful in developing thesis or project topic and methods.	○	○	○	○	○

3. Do you have any suggestions regarding the seminars portion of the program?

4. What electives did you find particularly useful and why?

5. What electives did not meet your expectations and why?

Environment and Community Program Graduate Exit Survey

2. General Satisfaction

1. What are the 2-3 most important ideas, theories or information you learned as an Environment & Community graduate student?

2. What was your "most memorable" assignment, project, or assessment (e.g., learned the most, most profound experience for learning)?

3. Which abilities specific to your Environment & Community studies have you developed? Which ones do you think are most important?

4. What stands out in your mind as the best part of your Environment & Community Program studies?

5. If you could change some aspects of the Environment & Community Program, what would be the most important changes you would suggest?

6. Are there any particular courses you would like to have taken, or areas/topics you would have liked the program to address more extensively?

7. Please circle the most appropriate response to the following questions.

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
How satisfied are you with your academic experience in the E&C Program?	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
How satisfied are you with the advising/mentorship you received in the E&C Program?	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
How satisfied are you with your overall student life experience in the E&C Program?	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

8. Would you recommend the E&C Program to a friend?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

9. What, if anything, could we have done to improve your satisfaction with either the academic or student life experience components of the program?

Environment and Community Program Graduate Exit Survey

3. Future Plans

1. What are your plans after graduation?

- [ ] Get a job.
- [ ] Pursue further education.
- [ ] Other (please specify)

2. Do you feel that your experience in the E&C Program has prepared you to achieve your career goals? Why or why not?

3. Are there any other comments you would like to add?

Appendix G - HSU Education Master's Program Alumni Survey Instrument

Masters of Education Alumni Survey

Hello, we are excited to reach out to you for the first time as a graduate of the MA. While we always hope we are providing the best MA program for professional educators in our region, we really have not had the opportunity to ask you for reflection on what we are doing well and what we need to change or improve. We cannot find out without your help. Please take a few minutes and complete this short survey to help us maximize the value of our graduate program for future educators who decide to earn a M.A. in Education.

1. What was the topic area of your thesis or project? ____________________________________

2. Which of the following programs did you complete (circle one):

   a. Masters of Arts W/ No Credential
   b. Masters of Arts W/ Administrative Services Credential
   c. Masters of Arts W/ Special Education Level II Credential

3. What aspects of your MA experience have you found particularly valuable to you once you graduated?

4. How useful was the MA program in helping you develop the following knowledge and skills?

The MA program helped you:	Not at all useful	A little	Moderately	Very useful	Please circle three letters below for the three outcomes you value **MOST**
a. Expand your awareness of social issues in Education	1	2	3	4	a.
Please explain why you rated this the way you did:					
b. Gain expertise in your area of research/project work	1	2	3	4	b.
c. Develop new ways to think about educational issues	1	2	3	4	c.
d. Improve academic writing skills	1	2	3	4	d.
e. Gain confidence in applying research to practice	1	2	3	4	e.
f. Gain confidence in your work as a scholar & educator	1	2	3	4	f.
G. Improve your confidence as a leader in the field	1	2	3	4	g.
H. Deepen your understanding of teaching and learning	1	2	3	4	h.
I. Effectively assess student learning	1	2	3	4	i.

What should we do to improve the MA program/experience?

Circle Answer

7.	Yes	Maybe	No	If you were just starting out, would you select Humboldt's MA again?
8.	Yes	Maybe	No	Would you recommend the program to others?
9.	Yes	Maybe	No	Would you like to attend an Alumni event to meet and talk with other graduates of the program?

The following section addresses issues related to online classes. If you did not take online classes as part of your degree, please skip this portion of the survey.

Indicate to what degree you agree with each statement.	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Not sure	Somewhat Agree	Agree
10. The program helped me become an effective online learner.	1	2	3	4	5
11. The online courses are easy to navigate.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Class webpages present course information clearly.	1	2	3	4	5
13. The course activities and content were accessible.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Interaction with other students and faculty was facilitated.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Online technology got in the way of learning the material.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Participating in the online class sessions was easy.	1	2	3	4	5

17. If courses can be only offered in one of the following ways, please indicate whether you would prefer that the courses for the MA be offered Face-to-Face or online. (circle one)

a. Face-to-Face b. Online

19. How many years have you been teaching or working as a professional in schools? _________

20. What year did you graduate? ______

Thank you so very much for your time and help with this survey.

Please use the envelope provided to return the survey by: **April 4th 2014**

Appendix H - HSU Environmental Systems 2018 Graduate Program Alumni Survey Instrument

Annex A. Environmental Systems Graduate Program Alumni Survey Questions

Environmental Systems Alumni Survey

Greetings Environmental Systems Alumni-

We would like your assistance in improving the Humboldt State University Environmental System MS Program. Completing this short survey (~5-10 minutes) will let us know about the successes of our alumni and provide you an opportunity to suggest improvements to the program. The survey results will remain internal and be shared only with the Environmental Systems program faculty.

Thank you for your time,
The Environmental Systems Faculty

* Required

1. **What is your name?**

2. **Which Environmental Systems Option did you complete?** *
   Mark only one oval.
   - Environmental Resources Engineering (ERE)
   - Energy Technology and Policy (ETaP)
   - Geology (GEOL)
   - Other:

Before HSU Environmental Systems

This section asks a few questions about your preparation before working on the Environmental Systems Masters at HSU.

3. **What was your undergraduate major?** *

4. **Where did you earn your undergraduate degree?**
   What was the name of the University or College where you earned your undergraduate degree?

5. **What was your occupation immediately previous to starting your studies in Environmental Systems at HSU?**
   If you were a full-time student beforehand, please state this as your answer.

After HSU Environmental Systems

These questions help us understand the kind of careers students pursue after the degree.

6. **Where do you currently live? (city, state/province, country)** *

7. **What was your first professional position after completing the MS in Environmental Systems? (title, organization, location, brief description of the position). If you pursued further academic studies immediately after graduation, please include this as your first professional position.** *

8. **What is your current professional position? (title, organization, location, brief description of position). If you are currently pursuing an academic degree, please include this information as your current position.** *

Assessment of HSU Environmental Systems

The answers in this question help us assess the quality of the masters degree program.

9. **Do you consider your current position to be in a field that is related to your MS studies at Humboldt State?** *

   Check all that apply.

   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

10. **In your view, did your MS studies in Environmental Systems provide you with academic training that was valuable for your current career trajectory?** *

    Check all that apply.

    - [ ] Yes
    - [ ] No

11. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest score), how would you rate the quality of your education in the Environmental Systems MS program?** *

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

12. **Based on your experience as a student, what were the strongest aspects of the Environmental Systems MS program at Humboldt State?**

13. **Based on your experience as a student, what could be done to improve the Environmental Systems MS program?**

14. **Please provide any additional comments that you may have about the Environmental Systems MS program at Humboldt State.**

Appendix I - HSU Sociology Master's Program 2015 Alumni Survey Instrument

Humboldt State Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey

1. **What is your current status in the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**
   Mark only one oval.
   - ( ) 1st Year Graduate Student
   - ( ) 2nd Year Graduate Student
   - ( ) 3rd Year Graduate Student
   - ( ) Alumni of the Program
   - ( ) Other: ____________

2. **What year did you start the HSU Graduate Program?**

   ____

3. **What was your emphasis in the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**
   Mark only one oval.
   - ( ) Teaching Sociology
   - ( ) Practicing Sociology
   - ( ) Both Teaching and Practicing Sociology
   - ( ) Other: ____________

4. **How many years were you (or do you anticipate being) in the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**

   ____

5. **Did you (or will you) graduate with your degree from the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**
   Mark only one oval.
   - ( ) Yes
   - ( ) No
   - ( ) I Don't Know

6. Did you/do you find the two year graduation timeline (three year for part time students) to be realistic?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I Don't Know

7. Please explain your answer.

____

8. What most attracted you to the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?

Please select your top three reponses.

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Program Accreditation
- ☐ Tuition Cost
- ☐ Wanted a Terminal Master's Degree
- ☐ Program Emphases
- ☐ Location
- ☐ Faculty Reputation
- ☐ Other: ____________________________________

9. To the best of your knowledge, what are the goals of the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?

____

____

____

____

____

10. If you had to sell the HSU Sociology Graduate Program in an elevator speech, what would you say?

____

____

____

____

____

11. **In your opinion, what are the top 5 skills students should have when they leave the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**

____
____
____
____
____

12. **What are the strengths of the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**

____
____
____
____
____

13. **What would strengthen the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**

____
____
____
____
____

14. **What are the top 3 barriers to student completion of the HSU Sociology Graduate Program?**

____
____
____
____
____

15. **Which HSU facutly was/is your thesis/project chair?**
Mark only one oval.

- Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt
- Dr. Sing Chew
- Dr. Christina Martinek
- Dr. Betsy Watson
- Dr. Josh Meisel
- Dr. Mary Virnoche
- Dr. Renée Byrd
- Dr. Meredith Williams
- Dr. Tony Silvaggio
- Dr. Sheila Steinberg
- Dr. Judith Little
- Dr. Jerry Krause
- Dr. Samuel Oliner
- Other

16. **If you had more than one thesis/project chair (e.g. switched chairs), please specify.**

17. **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.**
TOPIC: THESIS AND/OR PROJECT CHAIR
Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I had a good relationship with my thesis/project chair.					
My thesis/project chair was timely in their email responses.					
My thesis/project chair gave helpful feedback on my thesis/project.					
My thesis/project chair played a role in my success in the graduate program.					

18. **Which HSU facutly was/is your graduate coordinator?**
Mark only one oval.

- Dr. Jennifer Eichstedt
- Dr. Sing Chew
- Dr. Betsy Watson
- Dr. Josh Meisel
- Dr. Mary Virnoche
- Dr. Meredith Williams
- Dr. Sheila Steinberg
- Dr. Judith Little
- Dr. Jerry Krause
- Dr. Samuel Oliner
- Other

19. **If you had more than one graduate coordinator (e.g. changed during your time in the program), please specify.**

20. **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.**
TOPIC: GRADUATE COORDINATOR
Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I had a good relationship with my graduate coordinator.					
My graduate coordinator was timely in their email responses.					
My graduate coordinator played a role in my success in the graduate program.					

21. **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.**
TOPIC: SOCIOLOGY FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT
Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I had a good relationship with the faculty in the Sociology Department.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
The faculty members in the Sociology Department were timely in their email responses.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
The faculty members in the Sociology Department (i.e. those you took classes from) gave helpful feedback on my class assignments.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
The faculty members in the Sociology Department played a role in my success in the graduate program.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭

22. **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "This class was beneficial to my graduate level EDUCATION."**

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
Contemporary Social Theory	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Dispute Resolution	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Social Structure and Inequality	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Teaching Sociology	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Quantitative Research Methods	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Qualitative Research Methods	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Individual and Society	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Race, Ethnicity and Gender	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
Community, Ecology and Social Action	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭

23. **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "This class was beneficial to my CAREER."**
Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
Contemporary Social Theory						
Dispute Resolution						
Social Structure and Inequality						
Teaching Sociology						
Quantitative Research Methods						
Qualitative Research Methods						
Individual and Society						
Race, Ethnicity and Gender						
Community, Ecology and Social Action						

24. **Additional comments?**

Appendix J - Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

707-826-5165 | irb@humboldt.edu | www.humboldt.edu/human_subjects

MEMORANDUM

Date: **4/20/2018**

To: **Jennifer L Eichstedt**
Alison Hong-Novotney

From: **Susan Brater**
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

IRB #: **IRB 17-197**

Subject: 2018 HSU Public Sociology Graduate Program Evaluation Survey

Thank you for submitting your application to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research. After reviewing your proposal I have determined that your research can be categorized as Exempt by Federal Regulation 45 CFR 46.101 (b) because of the following:

Your research will involve the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), ***survey procedures, interviews procedures or observation of public behavior, and that information*** *obtained will be recorded in a manner that the human subjects will not be able to be identified directly, or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.*

The Exempt designation of this proposal will expire on **4/19/2019**. By Federal Regulations, all research related to this protocol must stop on the expiration date and the IRB cannot extend a protocol that is past the expiration date. In order to prevent any interruption in your research, please submit a renewal application in time for the IRB to process, review, and extend the Exempt designation (at least one month).

Important Notes:

- Any alterations to your research plan must be reviewed and designated as Exempt by the IRB prior to implementation.
  - Change to survey questions
  - Number of subjects
  - Location of data collection,
  - Any other pertinent information
- If Exempt designation is not extended prior to the expiration date, investigators must stop all research related to this proposal.
- Any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported immediately to the IRB (irb@humboldt.edu).

cc: Faculty Adviser (if applicable)
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects