

Surveying HS graduates helps districts improve

By Paul Heiser
SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST

Last June, the Unadilla Valley Central School District in Chenango County graduated 55 seniors from its high school. But rather than wondering what they went on to after graduation, the district did something simple: it asked them. And it has been asking graduates since 2014.

“Every year, the district does a survey of the graduating class, and the graduating class of the year before as a one-year follow-up,” said Kevin Nial, the district’s student advocate. “So, for example, in 2014, we surveyed both the class of 2014 and the class of 2013. In 2018, for the first time we will do a five-year follow-up for the Class of 2013.”

One might think that keeping track of past graduating classes would be routine for school districts. But a 2016 nationwide survey by Gallup found that more than four in 10 superintendents (42 percent) said their district either never surveyed past graduates (24 percent) or didn’t know whether the district did so (18 percent). Another 13 percent of superintendents said they surveyed past graduates less often than every five years.

Unadilla Valley uses a company called LifeTrack Services to survey recent graduates. LifeTrack’s 18-question survey tracks whether graduates entered college, the workforce, military, or pursued other interests and whether they believed the school district provided them with the necessary preparation.

The annual survey of the most recent graduating class is a paper questionnaire administered by the school district. Results and student contact information are sent to LifeTrack Services. LifeTrack Services conducts the subsequent annual and five-year follow-ups via email, text message or codes that allow respondents to scan and reply using their smart phones.



Unadilla Valley’s response rate has averaged about 70 percent for the one-year follow-up. The data are used to drive continuous improvement in the school district.

“We are receiving very helpful data that allow us to adjust programs accordingly,” Nial told *On Board*.

For example, the feedback from the survey has allowed the district to make helpful adjustments to its Future Path program, in which all students in grades 6 - 12 meet at the same time once a week for 40 minutes to develop college and career readiness skills. Students in grades 6-8 work on “soft skills” such as effective communication, while students in grades 9-12 work on “hard skills” such as writing, math, reading and the ability to use software programs.

Survey responses of the class of 2014 found that significant percentages of students felt they lacked critical thinking skills. The district used this information to

improve instruction on thinking skills by adding pieces to the curriculum to enhance those types of skills.

The district also talked with local business leaders such as Raymond, which manufactures forklifts, to find out what skills students are lacking the most and which skills they most excel at. These skills are then integrated into the existing curriculum.

The Hamilton-Fulton-Montgomery (HFM) BOCES has been surveying career and technical education students at the conclusion of their senior year since 2010. They then follow up with a second survey a year after graduation. The total number of students surveyed in the Class of 2017 was 269.

The post-graduate survey helps HFM BOCES identify what graduating seniors planned to do post-graduation. For example, the survey provided information on the numbers of students who planned to go to two- and four-year colleges, vocational or technical school, military service or straight into the workforce.

The survey also informed HFM BOCES how well it prepared students for their post-graduation endeavors. For instance, 95 percent of graduating seniors believed the Career and Technical Center (CTC) helped them develop the skills necessary to succeed in college, the workplace, or the military. Eighty-eight percent rated the CTC as either “excellent” or “good” in how well it prepared students with thinking skills such as creativity, decision making, and problem solving. The survey also allows HFM BOCES to drill down based on ethnicity, gender and the type of career and the type of technical program each student was in.

According to Jay DeTraglia, the director of career and technical education for the BOCES, student feedback is shared with teachers to determine if there are areas that need attention.

“For example, we have made a more concerted effort to focus on job-seeking skills as students previously indicated a lower feedback score for that area,” he said.

Tips for surveying past graduates

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Every school has its own concept of what it means to prepare students for life after high school, and no preset survey will work for all schools, according to Larry Ledgerwood, the CEO of LifeTrack Services, Inc., a company that administers graduate follow-up and school surveys.

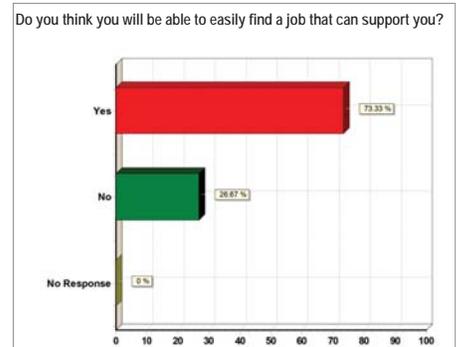
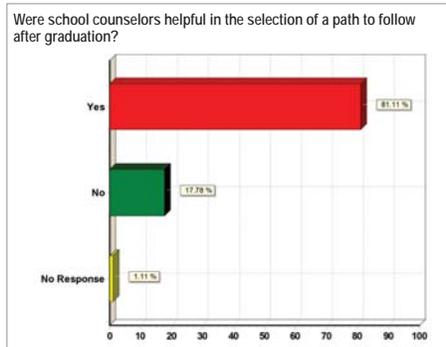
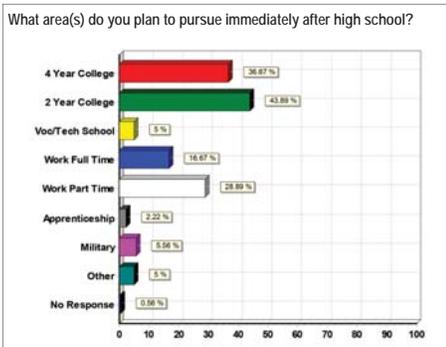
With that caveat, Ledgerwood offers the following advice for school districts doing surveys of past graduates:

- **Define your goals.** Identify your evaluation objectives at the outset prior to conducting the survey.
- **Keep questions simple.** For instance, don’t ask

compound questions. For example, if you ask whether school provided a “safe and drug-free environment,” students might believe school was 100 percent safe but not drug-free, so there will be ambiguity about how to answer the question and interpret the results.

- **Remind people to take the survey.** Rather than making a survey available and hoping graduates will respond, schools need to make an active effort to solicit survey responses. To yield a high response rate, use multiple channels to obtain responses, including snail mail, email and text messages. “Follow-up phone calls account for the majority of our survey responses,” said Ledgerwood.

- **Get objective analysis.** Having an unbiased third party compile and report the results adds validity to the data.



Charts from a sample report about a survey of high school graduates.

Source: LifeTrack Services