Feasibility of a Geography Alumni Survey at Trent

Includes:
Final Report

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Completed for:
Trent University Career Centre
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Trent Centre for Community-Based Education

Department: Geography
Course Code: GEOG 470
Course Name:
Term: Winter 2007
Date of Project Submission: April 2007

Project ID: 746

The Feasibility of an Alumni Survey at Trent University

Abstract: This project seeks to answer whether or not an alumni survey is feasible at Trent University. The two main parts of this project were a literature review and a test survey. The literature review involved gathering information on survey methods, design, and delivery. The test survey was a small questionnaire administered over the telephone that asked geography graduates relating to their employment history and satisfaction with their education from Trent. This study recommends that Trent administrators survey electronically, and an example of such a survey is included.

Acknowledgements

Throughout the year, we have worked with a variety of individuals who have provided us with support and encouragement. We would like to thank Steven Tufts for his constant support, feedback and enthusiasm towards our research.

We would also like to thank our community partner Kristi Kerford of the Trent University Career Centre for providing a vision for our research as well as research aids and resources. Also, thanks to the Trent University Alumni Association for providing us with a valuable database tool to pursue our research. Special thanks to Trent University Geography Alumni for without their willingness to participate in our test survey it would not have been possible. Without any of these individuals' contributions we could not have achieved our objectives

Finally, we would like to thank TCCEBE for their involvement and encouragement throughout our research.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature Review

A literature review is one portion of a complete research study that covers important issues pertaining to a research topic. Having an understanding of the main concepts, definitions and theories within a topic better prepares the researcher for the initial study. The study topic being analyzed throughout the literature is the feasibility of an alumni survey at Trent University. This review discusses the design of a survey, survey method approaches that are appropriate for a particular study, analysis of data techniques, ethical issues in survey research as well as examines government and educational institutions surveys that are already administered. The purpose of this report is to provide relevant information on the subject of survey methods and design pertaining to an alumni survey. This literature review will be beneficial to Trent University because it will provide background information to help guide future research. It will help to provide individuals with a vested interest in surveys the opportunity to investigate proper techniques and possible suggestions for research strategies. The surrounding community will also benefit from this report and it will help to fill in gaps of information that are currently unknown to some community members. Understanding survey design techniques are the first part of any survey that is going to be administered.

Section 2 Survey Design

Surveys are a widely used method to gather information about how people feel about a particular issue. Surveys are a powerful tool that allows researcher to figure out needs and how findings can be used to prove a research point. The purpose of developing a survey is to learn more about your target research. Creating an appropriate survey for

the type of study being conducted is one of the most important aspects of a research paper. Totten, Panacek and Price, 1999 describe how a survey can be an excellent research tool as they are relatively inexpensive and allow for quick data acquisition. Obtaining quality data requires a well-designed study using a carefully crafted survey.

2.1 Design

Totten et al., (1999) stated that designing a survey takes a lot of time and planning. Like all other forms of research, survey studies should start with an appropriate and important research question. Generally, the research question attempts to establish or predict a relationship between one or more independent variables. Designing the type of survey required depends on the type of information that is being researched. Surveys begin by asking respondents factual, non-threatening information such as gender, age and years of education etc. Giuffre (1997) relates how the understanding of background information is an essential part of survey design. It links together similarities within the study and makes for easier data analysis.

The process of selecting an appropriate survey design involves three steps. Fink (1995) clarifies how these steps are utilized. The first step is to establish the survey's aim or research question and establish the relationship between one or two variables. The second step questions the use of a control group. It looks to determine if there are any comparisons being used within the study. The third step determines who is eligible for the study. What is the target population being used within the study? Clarifying who is eligible makes it easier to create and access the study population. Survey design, which contains questions and interaction, should be optimized for the audience and should focus on the defined purpose of your research. (Survey Design

Considerations) Creating a survey design that can be utilized in a proper and productive way impacts the structure and results of the entire research project.

2.2 Survey Questions

Fowler (1984) and Fink (1995) have both contributed to the literature of studying the importance of content within survey questions**.** The purpose of a survey is to find out information pertaining to a selected research topic. Creating questions that will receive legitimate and logistical responses form much emphasis on the substance of each question. A question that asks for a response on more than one aspect will not provide the information the researcher is seeking. A good question asks for only one fragment of information. Multiple choice items are the most popular type of survey questions because they are generally the easiest for a respondent to answer and for the researcher to analyze. Asking a question that does not accommodate all possible responses can confuse and frustrate the respondent (Statpac, 2005).

While writing questions researchers must keep the respondents in mind. It is thought that respondents prefer shorter surveys as opposed to longer ones. Keeping questions clear and concise motivates the respondent to remain active in the survey. Wordy or complex questions may confuse or turn off respondents. Avoiding technical wording, such as slang and acronyms will also draw the respondent away from the particular design of the question. (Survey Design Considerations)

Common issues in designing questions are the use of double-barreled questions, biased questions, loaded questions and presuming questions. According to Flowerdew & Martin (2005), double-barreled questions ask for opinions about two different concepts, which will cause confusion among respondents and produce results that cannot be

interpreted properly. Biased questions lead to misinterpretation of results creating the respondent to answer according to the researchers needs. Loaded questions present only one side of an issue and hints towards the researcher's own point of view which will impact the validity response. Avoiding loaded questions by presenting both sides of the issue will result in an unbiased response. Presuming questions imply that the respondent possesses knowledge pertaining to the information within the survey. Presuming questions should be avoided as they may result in wrong or misleading answers. Graesser (2006) notes that survey questions should motivate valid and reliable answers from respondents in a short amount of time. Questions which involve critical thinking may result in casual or lacking answers.

Creating a general layout of questions should also be carefully planned. Questions should be laid out in a simple format, so that editing and coding can proceed easily. Designing questions that are relevant and target the right aspect of the research influence the overall outlook and findings of the final results.

2.3 Analyzing Survey Data

Fink (1995) details how surveys produce observations in the form of responses or numbers. Responses are stated in participants own words, which then can be counted, compared and interpreted. Numbers are obtained when the respondent may be asked to rate an item using ranking, scales or feelings. Numbers are analyzed using statistics and are interpreted with numerical information.

Cherlin (1991) describes the process of analyzing data as the most time consuming and tedious process in conducting a research study. Historically, analyzing data was difficult because standards did not exist for coding data. Today, protocols have

been developed for coding and the understanding of data, which has resulted in the process becoming less difficult.

The process of analyzing survey data depends on the type of data and the number of items or questions in the survey. Israel (2003) and Moser (1958) explain the process of how one would proceed in analyzing survey data. In approaching the analyzing process, each questionnaire must be checked for completeness. In order to proceed with the data analysis questionnaires must be reduced to a manageable size so that "the wood can be seen from the trees" (Moser, 1958). Computing the results into tabular format makes finding the similarities and differences more evident, thus affecting the directness of the results.

The analysis of data for a single question on a survey is fairly simple and begins by describing how responses are distributed among the categories. The task of data analysis becomes more complex when the number of items or questions is large. One common practice in the analysis of survey data is to look for relationships between specific topics and characteristics of respondents. Identifying these relationships for a needs assessment survey, can help identify segments of the population with a unique set of needs. An analysis which shows a significant effect when controlling other factors, further increases confidence in the conclusions.

2.4 Ethical Issues in Survey Research

Like all research that involves human subjects, the survey researcher needs to be attentive to the ethical manner in which the research is conducted. The basic guideline that researchers should follow is that no individual suffer any unfavorable consequences as a result of the survey (Fowler, 1984). It is a basic principle of ethical survey research

that respondents should be informed about what it is that they are volunteering for. The main issue with protecting the respondent is to keep the information they provide confidential. Confidentiality and anonymity should also be discussed with the respondent giving them the reassurance that they may withdraw from the survey at any time. Respondents should have the opportunity to access final results as they were the main contributors to the study. The use of ethical standards, help create guidelines to protect the interviewer and respondent. As each survey atmosphere is different, ethical issues may vary. Hay (2000) states how the blanket application of rules for informed consent, does not take into account the specifics of individual circumstances and character of some research projects. Surveys must be ethically sound in order to ensure the protection of the interviewer as well as the surveyor.

Section 1 Survey Methods

When conducting a survey there are several survey options that can be selected from. Each survey method gathers information in a different way, which is why it is important to know about each method and pick the one that is appropriate for the project. The three methods that will be examined are postal, computer web based and telephone. These survey methods will be discussed in detail below and the advantages and disadvantages of each will be given. By giving advantages and disadvantages it will allow for the individual administering the survey to choose the best method for the project, in this case an alumni survey. One of the possible methods that can be used for an alumni survey is a self-administered survey. This can take two forms, a postal questionnaire or a computer web based survey. The postal and web surveys require less manpower behind them but they rely on the selected individuals to respond and in a

timely fashion. This is compared to another survey option, a telephone survey. A telephone survey also allows the surveyor to reach people all over the world but it requires individuals to run the phone banks. The postal and web based surveys have common characteristics; the postal questionnaire will be discussed first.

1.1 Self-administered surveys

Self administered surveys are designed to gather specific types of information. A postal questionnaire is seen as a favorable survey method because the researcher is able to reach people all over the world for a relatively low cost. Postal questionnaires are used when researchers are measuring variables that have numerous response values that would be too much to read in a phone interview. As well as investigating attributes and opinions that researchers cannot observe, to describe characteristics of a large population and when asking questions that may be difficult to answer face-to-face (Nardi, 2006).

The "single greatest advantage of self-administered questionnaires is their lower cost compared to other methods" (Bourque & Fielder, 1995). Postal surveys were found to be cheaper than other methods because they do not require the time and funds that an interviewer or telephone call requires. However, as times have changed telephone surveys no longer cost as much as they once did. It has been found that "a completed questionnaire by mail costs approximately 50% less than one by phone and 75% less than one administered by personal interview" (Bourque & Fielder, 1995). This dramatic difference in costs allows funds to go further and allows for a larger sample size (Bourque and Fielder, 1995). Along with the lower cost there is an advantage on the geographic coverage that can be reached. Large geographical areas can be covered while using less people and less money. This can help a survey because it can create a more

representative sample population (Bourque & Fielder, 1995). Another advantage to using a mail questionnaire is convenience. It has been found that some people are reluctant to talk to strangers or solicit over the phone and that some may not have a phone, by sending a questionnaire in the mail people may be more willing to complete it because they can do so at their own convenience and do not have to commit to an interview (Bourque & Fielder, 1995). While postal questionnaires allow a researcher to reach a large sample area for a relatively little cost and entices people to participate because they can do so on their own schedule.

The disadvantages in using a postal survey can be categorized into three sections, sample related, questionnaire related and administration. The sample related disadvantages deal mainly with acquiring accurate lists of information from which samples can be drawn and response rates. If the availability of data lists is not available or inaccurate the information that is obtained cannot be seen as a representation of the population (Bourque & Fielder, 1995). By not being able to draw a representative sample the researcher's final results will not be representative either. Response rates are important to note "when a single mailing that incorporates no incentives is made to a sample of the general community, the surveyor can probably expect no better than a 20% response rate" (Bourque & Fielder, 1995) even with pre-mailing and incentives, response rates may still be low. While these are both valid disadvantages the issue of literacy and language must also be discussed. If a researcher has a sample that will be dealing with the elderly, visually impaired, illiterate or individuals whose first language is not English, then a mail survey may not be the best option (Bourque & Fielder, 1995). These are all

things that would impact the validity of a survey because they would affect the responses given.

Another disadvantage of a postal questionnaire is related to the questions within the survey. They can only be chosen if it is going to deal with simple straightforward questions and where the objective of the survey is clear. Postal surveys must be shorter, which covers less information and must be closed ended questions and it must 'stand alone'. The survey must also be designed with instructions so people will understand how to answer questions and they must be easy to follow and be clear and concise. (Bourque & Fielder, 1995). These are important issues when there is no interviewer present to probe and motivate the respondent, an individual needs to be able to read the question and know exactly what is required of them (Frey & Oishi, 1995). Also, by mailing out the questionnaire there is no surveyor present when the questions are being answered so the researcher loses control over the response pattern to the questions because the individual may answer them in any order they choose (Frey & Oishi, 1995). There is a possibility of uncertainty of who answered the survey, as a researcher you must assume that the person directed to answer the survey questions completed it. (Kalton & Moser, 1972). This is why it is important to make sure the questionnaire meets all the requirements previously stated.

The disadvantages of postal surveys also relate to timing. In order to complete a postal survey "a period of a month or more is probably needed from the date of the initial mailing to the commencement of the final analysis" (Kalton & Moser, 1972). This may include things such as pre-mailings, receiving the first set of responses and then mailing out reminders before receiving more responses.

There are many advantages and disadvantages to using a postal survey. They are suited towards particular forms of information gathering and would be quite productive when used under the right conditions. However, mail administered surveys are not the only form of self-administered surveys to be discussed; the other method is a computer wed based method.

The web based survey serves many of the same purposes as a mail survey in that it is relatively cost effective and can reach people all over the world. Web based surveys are seen as "an increasingly popular way of creating and distributing self-administered questionnaires" (Nardi, 2006). Studies have shown that "marketing researchers and others find that response rates increase with this method" (Nardi, 2006) of questionnaire distribution. Web based surveys work by sending questionnaires to respondents via e-mail or by directing them to an Internet link on a website where the survey is hosted (Nardi, 2006). This makes sending the information much faster then by mail and allows responses to be sent back very quickly thus increasing the response time. The sending of follow up e-mails is also a quicker process, which hopefully will assist in producing a better response rate. Another benefit of web based questionnaires is that many of the computer programs used to make the questionnaire are set up to allow for instant coding of the data "thereby eliminating a source of error that often occurs when researchers or their assistants enter data from a questionnaire by hand" (Nardi, 2006).

However, with any new technique of data collection there are always negative aspects. Some negative aspects for a web based survey may include the researcher not being familiar with survey creation computer software. They may need to hire a computer consultant which costs money or the researcher would need to become familiar

with the software themselves (Nardi, 2006). Having to hire a consultant may not be in the budget of such a survey therefore an alternate method may have to be chosen. Also, the researcher needs to consider the target population and who has access to a computer. "Variations in computer ownership based on race/ethnicity, age, sex, income, and education can dramatically affect the generalizability of findings from computer surveys" (Nardi, 2006) which is why a surveyor needs to keep such things in mind when deciding the best method for their survey.

1.2 Telephone surveys

The self-administered survey is only one of a few options to choose from when conducting a survey. Another option to consider is a telephone survey. "Interviewing people by telephone is the most popular way of conducting survey research" (Nardi, 2006) because it is less costly and time consuming than face-to-face interviews and less subjective to the person who is doing the interviews. Telephone surveys are more cost effective and have faster data collection then mail surveys because you do not have to wait for documents to arrive in the mail. By "using the telephone, a single interviewer can reach a large number of people over a wide geographic area in a short amount of time" (Frey & Oishi, 1995) which delivers excellent sample coverage and high response rates.

Another important aspect of the telephone survey is that they have the advantage of a face-to-face survey in that the surveyor can still probe questions further by using open-ended questions (Nardi, 2006) where as in a mail survey this cannot be done. Telephone surveys also create a more personal feeling when interacting with the individual that you are surveying, which may be beneficial because it can create a certain

comfort level (Nardi, 2006). In regards to time, it is felt that if the individual gives

consent "short phone surveys of around twenty minute's duration appear to be the

maximum many will tolerate" (Nardi, 2006).After the introductory statements are read,

respondents are more likely to complete the survey because they may loose track of time

(Frey & Oishi, 1995). However, one cannot take this information and attempt to conduct

hour-long surveys via the telephone because after a while fatigue will set in on both

parties and this will affect the results of the survey (Frey & Oishi, 1995). One method to

increase response rates is to send an advance letter or conduct a pre-call. This reduces the

surprise and gives the respondent time to think about a topic (Frey & Oishi, 1995), which

may make them more interested in answering the researcher's questions when making

calls.

Telephone surveys are important as they allow the surveyor to use different

questioning methods to elicit the best responses from participants. Telephone surveyors

can use three different methods in the questioning of participants, they are, the split

question technique, the funnel and the inverted funnel technique. The split question

technique focuses on the first question asked, as a general one such as choosing

something from a list and then based on the response a specific clarifying question is

asked (Frey & Oishi, 1995). The funnel technique to which "guides respondents through

a complex concept using a series of questions that progressively narrow the field of

interest" (Frey & Oishi, 1995). Lastly there is the variation on the funnel, which is the

inverted funnel technique. This is used when you do not expect your respondent to be

knowledgeable about a specific topic (Frey & Oishi, 1995). It starts with specific

questions on the components of a larger issue being asked to focus and educate the

respondent followed by general questions (Frey & Oishi, 1995). These three approaches

of performing a telephone survey are all beneficial as they incorporate aspects of the

face-to-face interview but allow for the lower cost and quickness of a telephone

interview.

1.3 Pilot surveys

Once you have decided which survey method best suits your needs and have

created a survey it is a wise idea to perform a pilot test of the survey to see how well it

will work. A pilot survey is testing a sample of the survey on a small group of individuals

to ensure there are no discrepancies in the format and questions. It is also a way to test

out possible response rates. A pilot test is "the best way of assessing whether the

questionnaire flows, the instructions are adequate, the wording of the items and format

are clear, and the survey takes a reasonable time to complete" (Nardi, 2006). When

distributing the pilot survey it is important not to give it to anyone who you want in your

final sample because they will have already seen the questions and it could create bias

with their answers (Nardi, 2006). "The size and design of the pilot survey is a matter of

convenience, time and money. It should be large enough to fulfill the above functions,

and the sample should ideally be of a comparable structure to that of the main survey"

(Kalton & Moser, 1972) so that it will give a representative idea of what to expect when

conducting the final survey. After conducting the pilot survey which will inevitably find

room for improvement to the questionnaire either in the questions themselves or the format (Kalton & Moser, 1972). Once changes have been decided upon then researchers can go ahead and implement them into the survey before distributing it to the larger sample population.

Section 3 Survey Information Used Within Institutions and Governments

3.1 Motivations for Survey Creation

The most dominant motivation driving universities and colleges to perform alumni surveys is to find out about graduates employment patterns after graduation. The surveys seek to obtain rates of employment for recent graduates, assess job and career satisfaction, type of employment, and determine if their work is related to the degree they obtained. The information can then be used as a comparison tool to determine trends and patterns of employment across programs of study, graduation year, and other variables. For example, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities in Ontario collects employment information of graduates through a survey conducted by all Ontario universities. It is conducted for statistical purposes in obtaining rates of employment for recent graduates. Some institutions use this information as a tool to help current students see possible jobs in their field of study and to assess the likelihood they will be hired upon graduation.

The second largest motivation for the conduction of surveys is the evaluation of the graduates overall satisfaction with the institution. The surveys ask questions such as if their education prepared them for their current job and the workplace, and how well the institution developed their different skill sets, and how well the institution functioned. The institution can then use this information to evaluate the way it prepares students for

the workplace. If they get a negative feedback obvious changes have to be made to enhance the student's growth and learning. Schools such as York University and the University of Windsor use this information to help departments evaluate programs in order to enhance the educational experience and make changes benefiting the student. For example academic departments at Wilfred Laurier University use their survey data as part of their 7-year review, as well as for external surveys and accreditation (i.e. MBA Review, Canadian Business Survey of MBA Schools, and Co-op Accreditation) (Basso, 2006).

Another theme is the exploration of whether or not graduates pursued further education or not. This involves questioning what programs they take after graduating, for example certificate, MBA or PhD and where they go to complete this further education. Some of this information can be used to let current students know opportunities and for the institution to look into adding more programs that graduates would be intrigued by.

At some schools, alumni associations use surveys as a tool to find out about graduates alumni experience and their current connections to the school. For example, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville conducts an extensive online alumni survey in order to assist the Alumni Association in identifying how it can best serve the university and its alumni through an assessment of its programs, benefits and services (Southern Illinois University, 2003).

After reviewing multiple surveys from institutions throughout North America many things were found to be similar. The four above trends were present in the majority of all surveys. Trent University is no different from any of these schools, as they are looking to find out career patterns of graduates, how satisfied graduates are with their education, and

if their education related to their career paths. Trent would also benefit from this information as it could use the information as a tool to help inform current students on opportunities that are available after they finish their studies at Trent and it could serve as a recruiting tool for prospective students.

Section 3 Survey Information Used Within Institutions and Governments

3.1 Motivations for Survey Creation more

3.1(b) Government/Other

The Government of Ontario administers its own survey which is conducted by the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC), on behalf of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), who is contracted to conduct and compile Ontario University Graduate Survey under contract with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities collects employment information of graduates through a survey conducted by all Ontario universities. It is conducted for statistical purposes in obtaining rates of employment for recent graduates.

The purpose of the survey is to collect data on factors such as: "the extent to which graduates of postsecondary programs had been successful in obtaining employment since graduation; the relationship between the graduates' programs of study and the employment subsequently obtained; the graduates' job and career satisfaction; the rates of under-employment and unemployment; the type of employment obtained related to career expectations and qualification requirements; and the influence of postsecondary education on occupational achievement" (Statistics Canada, 2004).

MacLean's Magazine has published popular graduate surveys in 2004 and 2006, which are used to rank universities to aid the students and families in their search of potential locations to attend postsecondary institutions.

3.2 Survey Design/Delivery

Though many institutions have similar motivations for completing the surveys, the design and delivery of them was somewhat different. Most of the surveys are structured with similar sections; demographics, education, employment. Demographic questions are important for categorizing the graduates and making trends, but also give the institution contact information so they can better reach their graduates in the future. Academic questions look at major, type of degree, satisfaction with educational experience, what impact the school had on graduates lives, the development of skills, and if they went on to further education. Employment sections focus on current and past employment, earnings, and most importantly whether the skills graduates obtained relate to their jobs. Some institutions included sections from the alumni associations asking their satisfaction with the association and whether or not they would like to donate to the institution. This was not a big trend with most Canadian schools but more prevalent in the United States.

There were multiple methods used to deliver the survey to graduates, with some institutions using more than one delivery method. For example, Wilfred Laurier gives a brief survey to graduates at convocation, and then follows up with mailing and a phone call to those who had not responded and to those who were still looking for employment. More traditional methods such as postal and telephone surveys are still being used but there is a growing emergence of more digital methods such as email and online survey

dissemination. The York University Faculty of Environmental Studies 2002 alumni

survey was done using a fax in survey which could be downloaded off the internet. The

ease and low cost of digital formats makes them favourable and more surveys will be

delivered using these methods. Follow ups are a regular practice by institutions in order

to increase response rates. Another observation is that not all the schools conducted these

surveys themselves. Lower Canada College and Concordia University both used

independent providers to conduct the surveys. Using these services can help to eliminate

bias that an institution might have and using an organization experienced with survey

dissemination is an asset to an institution that is inexperienced or one that is having a

hard time conducting their survey.

All these things are important for Trent to look at when conducting any type of

graduate or alumni survey. The growing trend of using online and email surveys would

be a good way for the school to proceed. However, these tend to need databases

complete with current email addresses for the alumni. This is a problem as people have

multiple emails addresses and their addresses are always changing. An advantage of

these methods is that they keep costs down and are very user friendly as the world today

runs on computers.

3.2 Survey Design/Delivery

3.2(b) Government/Other

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Survey of Graduates is

targeted towards graduates of undergraduate degree programs. It asks a variety of

questions about employment situation six months and two years after graduation to infer

employment rates. The survey can be completed by phone, mail or via the internet. The

survey focuses in on three areas, employment rate, earnings and whether skills learned relate to jobs. The employment rate determines the overall employment for graduates of undergraduate programs, earnings determine the average annual salaries of graduates and skills match focuses on how employed full-time graduates felt that work was closely or somewhat related to their university education.

Each year in Canada, Statistics Canada, a branch of the Government of Canada carries out a National Graduate Survey (NGS). This survey has been designed to determine the short to medium term labour market outcomes of graduates from Canadian public universities, community colleges and trade-vocational programs that live in Canada or the United States (Statistics Canada, 2004). The intent of the survey was to determine factors such as graduate's employment rates since graduation, how employment and university education were linked, career satisfaction and the influence of university education as it related to occupational achievement. This type of national survey is considered a panel study. A panel study involves a cross-sectional sample that are selected and surveyed at regular intervals and includes a longitudinal follow-up (Statistics Canada, 2004). Each graduating class is surveyed two years after graduation as well as five years after graduation. This survey is expensive to conduct and takes a long time to generate useful data.

MacLean's graduate survey of 2006 randomly selected participants that graduated from the undergraduate classes of 2002, 2003, 2004 (Dwyer, 2006). The short, eight question survey was conducted online and asked graduates about the quality of their student experience and the impact that their university had on their lives. MacLean's

2006 Graduate Survey had a response rate of 21% from the 14,697 grads that were sampled across 23 universities (Dwyer, 2006).

The target population of the Government of Ontario's survey includes individuals who have graduated from a Canadian public postsecondary education institution and were granted a degree, diploma or certificate. The survey is not available to graduates who are living outside of Canada or the United States at the time the survey is administered. The survey is voluntary, for example in the class of 2000 there were 61,558 surveys distributed. The response rate was 65.6% (38,483). The Globe and Mail, a Canadian newspaper began the "Globe and Mail University Report Card" as a tool to collect data from Canadian universities. The data collected was information about academic programs, student residences, faculty, food services, course selection, and campus atmosphere. Students are able to search the Globe and Mail website and view statistics collected online or view a hardcopy version in the newspaper. Prospective students are able to select indicators like potential class sizes and the system will match the student with universities that produce similar hits. The Globe and Mail survey is different from the MacLean's survey as they are based on indicators.

3.3 Response Rates

When working on a survey and conducting research, it is an institutions hope that there will be a 100% response rate meaning that everyone will complete the survey. Unfortunately it is almost certain that there will never be a perfect response rate. To some types of studies response rates are not a big factor, but response rates are important for a study to be used to make generalizations for populations. They are much less important when the purpose of the study is just to gain insight. Depending on the survey

type researchers have to expect different response rates, for example of a mail survey a 50% response rate is adequate, while a 70% is very good; email surveys produce different response rates. If there is a response rate of 40% that is considered average while a 60% response rate is very good. Other surveys like phone surveys, 80% is a good response rate while online surveys an average response rate is only about 30% (University of Texas at Austin, 2006). In order to make sure the researcher maximizes the response rate there are a few things that can be done. You must allow enough time for people to complete the survey and for a mail survey you must allow enough time for the survey to be sent back to you. People forget about surveys or put them off to the side and may answer them later but since there is not a lot of time to wait for them to be returned there are a few things that you can do to make sure they do not forget. One is to send reminders to people; this is usually only done with mail and online surveys. The other is to offer an incentive for the person to complete the survey. If someone sees an incentive that accompanies the survey they are more likely to fill it out and return it (University of Texas at Austin, 2006).

The response rate of the different institutions surveys all depended on the type of survey dissemination method and how long after graduation the survey was conducted. These can be important factors in getting good response rates. After a student graduates it can be hard to track them down; keeping contact information up to date is imperative in helping to increase response rates. An interesting fact from the University of Colorado at Boulder suggests that the response rate depended on a graduates program of study. The overall response rate of their 2003 survey was 19%, response rates varied across majors. For example it was 0% in Fine Arts and 100% in Business Administration (University of

Colorado at Boulder, 2006). A response rate is impossible to determine before hand as many different factors can affect them, such as the willingness of people to complete the survey and if the alumni contact information is accurate. The University of Colorado at Boulder has observed a decline in the response rate to their surveys over the last ten years, which is a sign of a national trend in the United States towards a decreased willingness to respond to mail surveys (University of Colorado at Boulder, 2006). Institutions experience a wide range of response rates, as the studies examined for this report ranged from 13% to 80%. The problem with lower response rates is that they can limit the institution when evaluating data on a program/departmental basis.

All of these factors have to be taken into account when conducting a survey; they must be designed and administered in order to get a high response rate. If a low response rate is achieved the data is less useful and a lot of hard work is performed for little return. When Trent is looking at conducting a survey it can pick its methods based on estimated response rates. The researcher will also have to take the above factors into account when writing and designing the survey. The best way to increase response rates is to make it very 'user friendly', choose an easy dissemination method, emphasize its value and the connection between the school and its graduates, and to possibly include an incentive.

3.3(b) Incentives

As the use of student and alumni data has increased, response rates to surveys have been falling in the general population (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003). Low response rates raise the question of how representative the data is and whether the results can be used as generalizations of the larger population. In order to increase response rates the uses of incentives have been explored by a variety of scholars and institutions. Examples

of incentives are small monetary amounts (usually $1-$5), token gifts, the mention of benefits that will go to groups to whom the respondent belongs, benefits to the population as a whole, and assistance to the research sponsor (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003).

Cash surveys have been the most successful, but the relationship between the size of the incentive and the survey response is less clear, however the most commonly used cash incentive is around $1-$2 (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003). Pre-paid monetary incentives result in greater increases in response rates (on average 19.1% higher compared to no incentive) than non-monetary incentives (on average 7.9% higher) (Church, 1993). According to Church (1993), incentives only have a consistent and significant positive effect on response rates if they are pre-paid instead of promised to be received at the end of the survey. However, this method of pre-payment has so far only been applicable to mail out surveys. The growth of online surveys has meant the search for new forms on incentives.

For web-based surveys it has not been possible to administer monetary incentives via the internet in advance (Bosnjak & Tuten, 2003). The most popular method of incentive for online surveys has been the use of prize draws (Bosnjak & Tuten, 2003; Porter & Whitcomb, 2003). However, the impact of these prizes draws on a response rate that is uncertain. According to Bosnjak & Tuten (2003), prize draws are a sound method in terms of generating a strong response rate and high quality data. In contrast, Porter & Whitcomb (2003) state that the literature shows they have little or no impact on survey response. Other online incentives are being explored, such as paypal deposits, and electronic gift certificates to online stores (Heerwegh, 2006). In Downes-Le Guin et.

al.'s web survey they found that the pre-paid incentive in the form of an e-gift certificate increased response rates more than the post-paid incentive (Heerwegh, 2006).

The University of Colorado at Boulder's Four Years Out Survey of 1998 experimented with incentives. They mailed half of the surveys with $2 enclosed and half without. Those who got the $2 incentive were more likely to respond by 10% (University of Colorado at Boulder, 2006). Because of this in their 2001 survey they sent a $2 incentive with every survey. This was feasible due to their smaller sample sizes (e.g. 450 alumni for their 2001 survey). Their 2003 Alumni Survey offered a chance at winning a cash prize of $1200 to those who returned a completed questionnaire.

3.4 Conclusion

There are a wide variety of motivations for alumni surveys. They provide employment information and statistics for the school as well as prospective and current students, and are a highly useful tool for recruitment. They are a valuable resource for career centres for their career development programs. Academic departments use them to assess how well their programs fare at preparing their students for the workforce. Alumni Associations use them to assess their effectiveness in meeting the needs of alumni and to encourage donations to the university.

The current state of alumni surveys is very inconsistent among institutions. Some schools depend on them greatly, while others are just beginning the development of surveys. Two universities in Colorado have very advanced alumni survey procedures. Others universities have just begun the development of their surveys, such as the

University of Windsor. Wilfred Laurier has developed a straight forward survey which yields them a wide array of information they can use.

Currently the majority of alumni surveys are administered through mail. The second most common survey method is telephone interviews. However, in the future when there is better access to alumni emails surveys will be administered over the web. This saves the cost of printing, mailing, and phone calls.

Response rates vary depending on survey size, type, incentives, and the connectedness of the alumni to the school. People are most likely to fill out surveys that are shorter rather than longer. People are more likely to fill out a survey that offers an incentive. Pre-paid incentives are more effective than post-paid incentives, and cash incentives are more effective than non-cash incentives. People may find it easier and be more inclined to fill out an online survey rather than having to fill out and mail a paper copy. Alumni that are still involved with their school are more likely to return a survey than those who are not.

In general, there is a lack of alumni and graduate research being done by universities and colleges throughout Canada. An investigation to determine if other countries have done or are doing any type of alumni or graduate surveys led to the indication that other countries are minimally conducting alumni surveys but have an interest in where their graduates have gone and the types of occupations they occupy. Canada and more specifically Ontario are leading the way in the conduction of such types of surveys. The large province of Ontario is home to nineteen universities and more than one hundred college campuses (Hicks, 2006). Therefore, Ontario has a vested interest in where their graduates are going and what they are doing with their degrees. Since

Ontario is a province with the most institutions this indicates that there is a greater need and an interest in obtaining alumni information. A large number of schools within Ontario are conducting their own types of alumni surveys to gather information for their own databases and their departments. Departments are slowly catching on and there has been a large increase in specific departments that are conducting surveys. Since the idea of alumni surveys is relativity new there will be many other institutions that will conduct research in the future. Other provinces within Canada are conducting some alumni surveys and in particular provinces in the Maritimes have an interest but it is not widely done as it is in Ontario.

Overall, there is a lack of government research being done in regards to alumni and graduates of Colleges and Universities. Governments can use alumni studies to determine satisfaction rates and to determine how graduates feel about the quality of their postsecondary education. This information can provide institutions with valuable information to determine any changes that may need to be made to better a school and whether the government needs to be of any assistance to those institutions. As mentioned the government does a National Graduate Survey which does look specifically at particular programs but tries to collect a broader and more general type of data. The government may be hesitant to conduct any type of alumni studies relating to specific departments because it is time consuming and can be costly. They may feel that if institutions want to find out that type of detailed information they could conduct their own research and the government will provide general details.

Methods

Test Survey Design

To design the test survey our research group convened to brainstorm ideas for questions, using the information gathered through the literature review process as well as information on geography research methods previously obtained through courses at Trent University. It was important for the entire group to be a part of this process because everyone had all researched different aspects of survey design and alumni research for the literature review and therefore each person had something different to contribute. Also the presence of many people during survey creation ensures that the questions created for the survey are understandable and properly worded in order to make it as easy as possible for the participant to respond and provide the information that is needed. The first decision to make was what method to use to distribute the survey. It was decided that a telephone survey would be conducted because it would be a faster survey process than a postal survey and it would also be less expensive to carry out as our host does not have a large budget and they could provide the telephone services that would be required. It was then necessary to determine whether it was desired or not to examine cohort years against each other. Looking at a variety of cohort years was decided to be the best course of action and the years of graduates that were selected to be examined were 1990, 1995 and 2000 because they would give a good look at where geography graduates went on in life

after graduation over a large period of time as well as satisfy our hosts desire to look at more recent graduates. Once these decisions were made the next step of the process was survey creation.

When brainstorming question ideas the information that our host was looking for was reviewed in order to form questions that would yield useful information. Other alumni surveys that were reviewed as part of our literature review were examined for possible questions that may have been overlooked. The survey was composed using a sectional approach, much like the ones other alumni surveys use, to help the survey flow better. The survey was organized into questions relating to demographics, education and employment. When creating our own questions the aim was to keep them clear and concise. It was felt by the group that if the questions were short and to the point it would be easier to administer over the phone as the questions would not be too 'wordy'. Also if the questions were short it would not take much time to complete, which would help increase the alumni's willingness to participate, as people would be less likely to want to complete a large survey over the phone. Furthermore a questionnaire with short, concise questions would be easier to analyze. The questions format was chosen based on what the question was asking. Simple demographic questions and sensitive questions utilized ranges (e.g. current income) while others were more open ended such as those asking occupation. Once the draft of our test survey was completed it was passed onto our supervisor and host so that they could look it over and suggest any changes that they felt were important before it was sent for ethics review. Any project that involves gathering information directly from other people is required to undergo a review by the ethics board. This ensures that any sensitive issues are correctly handled and that there are no

ethical issues with the research. In order for our research to be ethical, respondent

identity must be kept anonymous and the results from the study must be made available

to respondents if they request it.

Test Survey Execution

Once the survey design was completed the next step was to decide when the

survey would be administered. This was limited by our host's availability and she had to

be present while the survey was being conducted as it took place after hours. It was

conducted in the Trent Career Center where our host was able to provide us with three

telephones to utilize. Days for conduction were agreed upon between our group and the

host, and the time slot for survey administration was between the hours of 6:30-8:30pm.

Four days were chosen to perform the initial call and two callbacks. These hours were

chosen because it is the ethical time to make calls and it is unethical to disturb people late

in the evening and while they are eating dinner.   Next, the sample population had to be

decided upon. Originally it was planned to have a large sample population (e.g. 50 from

each entry year), however the database was smaller than anticipated and the sample size

was shrunk to twenty names from each of the three years. The twenty were chosen by

selecting every second individual on the list until our target number of twenty was

reached. This random selection method was decided upon before seeing the database to

remain unbiased.

After selecting the sample population it was necessary to create a legend for the

procedures when calling alumni so that if databases were switched between group

members they could know exactly who has been contacted and what still needed to be

done. A persons name was highlighted if they needed a call back. This was done if they

were called and there was either no answer, the individual was not available or if they were presently occupied and asked us to try them again later. Since there was to be a maximum of three calls to each person different colour highlighters were used each night to keep track of who had been called on a certain evening. The next part of the legend consisted of writing the letters WN (wrong number) next to a person if they could no longer be reached at that number. The initials NP stood for 'not willing' and were written beside a persons name if they were contacted but they did not wish to participate in our survey. If a person was contacted and they participated in our survey their names were crossed off the list. This legend was very useful because on each of the three nights phone calls were made; different group members were present to make the calls. This prevented confusion as databases were switched on each of the nights. It should be noted that due to the small sample size the calls were completed in three nights instead of the four nights originally planned.

During completion of the survey no ones identity was recorded to maintain anonymity. Names were only used in order to make the phone calls. After the calls were finished the databases was given to our host at the Career Center to hold onto. Upon completion of this study the database would be destroyed.

A professional attitude was maintained while making the calls in order to best represent the university and ourselves. When calling the alumni they were asked for by the name given in the database and if they were unavailable no call back information was left and a call back at another time was needed. Some individuals who wanted to participate but were busy at that moment requested that they be called back and some gave certain times that would be best to reach them. This information was not asked for

but was taken when it was willingly offered. This type of situation also occurred when

contacting more recent graduates. It appears that the alumni association has not been able

to track graduates recent movements because there were many people that informed us

that the person who was the target of our call no longer lived in a particular location; but

they had a new contact number which they willingly supplied. It was unclear whether or

not it was ethical for us to use the numbers that had been given to us so it was decided

that it was best to ask our supervisor. After coming to him with the situation he said that

as long as the information was given willingly and that it was not asked for, then it would

be okay to use the new contact information. This new contact information was also

passed onto the Trent alumni association so they could update their records.

All of these instances combined allowed for a smooth completion of the test

survey and allowed us to gather a large amount of information that once analyzed will

hopefully benefit the Career Center and Trent University. The process from creation to

conduction was a difficult one that needed a lot of attention to detail. In being thorough it

was ensured that the process would go as smooth as possible.

Test Survey Data Analysis:

The raw data that was recorded was manually entered into an Excel spreadsheet.

A general format was made which followed the format for the survey. There were four

spreadsheets made, one for each of the three years specifically investigated and one for

the combined results of all three years. Graphs of the data that was felt to be of

importance or that was useful were then made from the combined results of all three

years. Pie graphs and bar graphs were used as they were the graphical forms that display

the data most clearly. After analysis of the data and graphs conclusions were then

derived.

Full Survey Design

        When it came to designing the full survey the same process was followed as

described for the test survey but with some differences. The methods for creating the

survey and brainstorming remained the same but there was a different objective to be

met. The full survey that was designed was made to be administered in an online format.

A suggestion is that the survey should either be emailed to alumni where they then email

it back upon completion or to provide a link to a website that can be accessed by alumni

where they can submit it online. There are software packages available to have the data

automatically coded which will also save time in analyzing mass amounts of information.

The full survey was also designed to be more extensive in the questions that it asked. Its

goal was to try and create a full employment history of an individual and to assess their

satisfaction with the education they received at Trent. It will be interesting to see where

the individual has gone since graduating from Trent and if the careers that they have

entered into relate to the degree(s) that they received at Trent or if they have chosen to do

something very different. In finding this out the Career Center hopes to better their

ability to help Trent students who come to them asking, "What can I do with my degree?"

The desire was to maintain a simplistic survey so as to not overwhelm individuals with

complex questions and to make it easy for them to complete the survey. The full survey

includes questions from the test survey along with others that were created in order to

obtain the desired information. Surveys from other institutions were utilized along with research from the literature review to create questions that may not have thought of or to include those that were common among other institutions. Much like with the test survey the draft copy of the full survey was reviewed by our supervisor so that feedback could be given on the format and the wording of questions. The process in creating the full survey, it was more complicated and time consuming as proper wording and layout was laboured over intensely to ensure it was as user-friendly as possible.

RESULTS

Our test response results are shown in Figure 1. A response rate of 25% (15 of 60 surveys completed) were received which matched the first time response rate for a graduate survey (Lower Canada College, 2006). A large number (25%) of the contacts had incorrect contact information. This leads us to conclude that the database needs to be updated more regularly. Surprisingly, there were a small number (8% or five people) of people who were uninterested in completing the survey. This is a good sign that people are willing to complete surveys and help Trent gather information. The majority of the sample population (40%) we were unable to get a hold of over the course of three calls. This can be attributed to the time of day that we call as people may not be home from work, are out of their homes, etc. In order to make this number smaller, a larger number of call backs would be necessary.

Figure 2 shows the alumni activity after graduation. Eighty percent of respondents went on to pursue further education after graduation from Trent. While twenty percent of respondents entered the workforce immediately after graduation, and six percent of respondents travelled after graduation. The fact that the majority of respondents went on to pursue further education shows the importance of advanced education in today's society.

The time between graduation from Trent and the respondent's first job is displayed in Figure 3. 80% of graduates began their first job within four months of graduation. This makes sense as university puts a large financial burden on people and they are eager to get out into the workforce and pay off their debts.
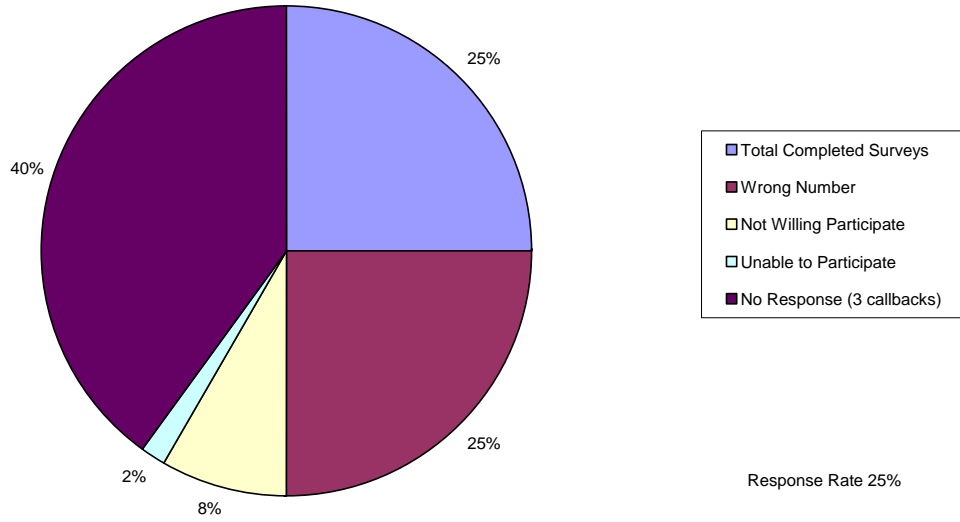
Survey Sample Results

- Total Completed Surveys
- Wrong Number
- Not Willing Participate
- Unable to Participate
- No Response (3 callbacks)

25%

40%

2%

8%

25%

Response Rate 25%

Figure 1: Graph shows survey response rates.

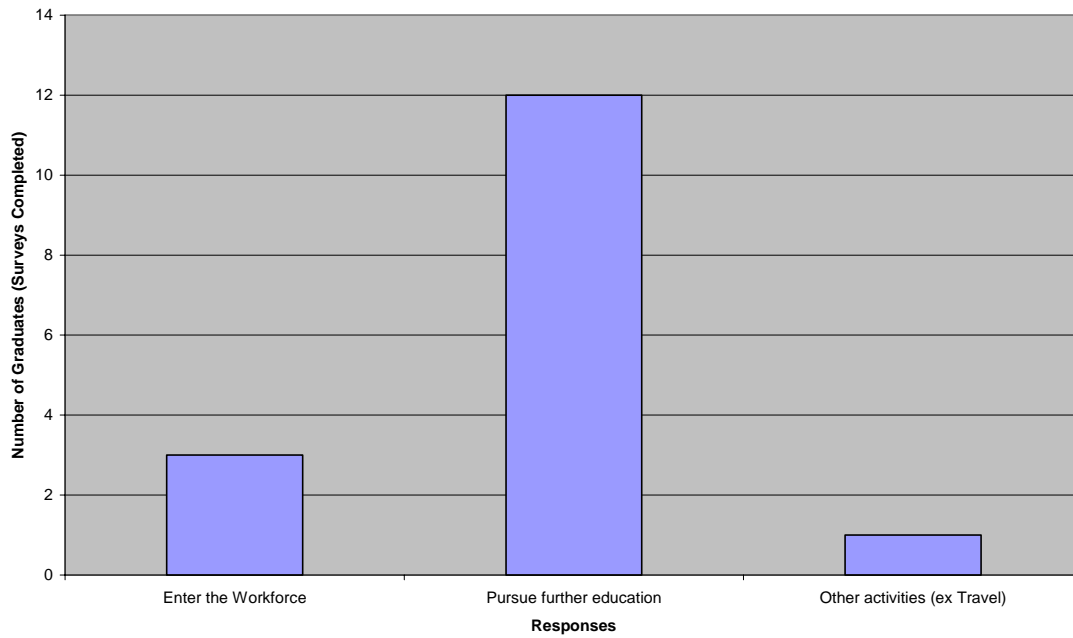## Post Graduation Activity

Figure 2: Graph shows respondents post graduation activity.
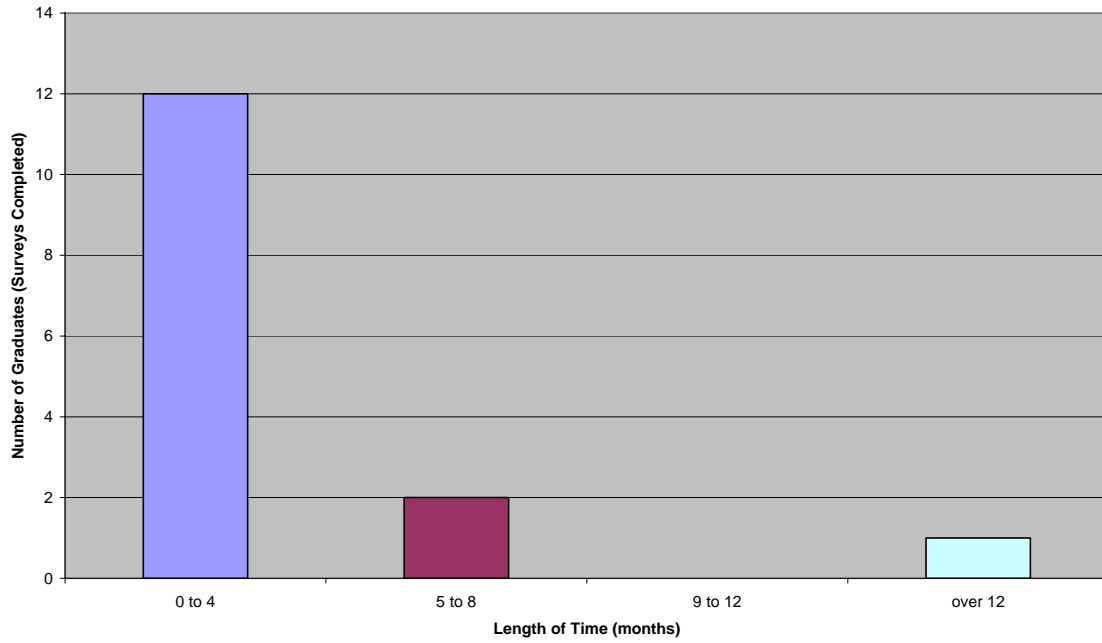
Time Between Graduation & First Job

Figure 3: Graph shows time between graduation and first job for all respondents.

Table 1

Current Career	# Responses
Teacher	5
Undeterminable	3
Administrator	1
Archivist	1
Insurance	1
Land use planner	1
Program assistant	1
Stay-at home mom	1
Vice principal	1

The data from Figure 2 shows that 80% went on to pursue further education, the same number that began their first job within four months of graduation. This finding is relevant because the majority of people work while completing further education for financial reasons. Ninety-three per cent of respondents were working within eight months of graduation. They might not have necessarily been working in the same field of study but they held a job. Figure 4 looks at whether the graduate's first job was in the field of study of their degree. Two-thirds of the respondents were employed in a field of study relating to their degree. For the purposes of this study, all respondents have completed a degree in geography. The current occupations of all respondents are listed below in (Table 1). The most common career path of respondents is teaching in elementary and secondary education (33%). This correlates with the fact that most respondents went on to pursue further education after graduating from Trent. Teachers need to go on to complete teacher's college after completing their undergraduate degree. Note that due to the design of the question three responses were deemed undeterminable, because the answer given by the respondent was that of the company and not their occupation. Figure 5 shows a comparable ratio of people currently employed in a job relating to their degree. In this case sixty percent of respondents are currently employed in a job relating to geography. Figure 7 shows that 80% (12 of 15) of respondents answered that the skills and knowledge obtained from Trent University helped them obtain their current employment. The education and experience that they gained from Trent is useful to their employment, even though not all respondents are employed in a job relating to their degree of study.

Current location of employment was assessed with relation to driving distance from Peterborough in kilometres (Figure 6). Twenty-seven percent of people work within 100km range of Peterborough, forty percent work within 101-200km away, twenty percent of people work within 201-300km, and seven percent work within 901-1000km away from Peterborough. The majority (10 of 15, 67%) live within 200 kilometres of Peterborough telling us that they have not ventured very far from Trent University to work after graduation. This can be partly attributed to the proximity to the Greater Toronto Area which is a huge employment centre in Ontario. All 15 respondents currently work in Ontario, note that one person did not give a specific city of employment.
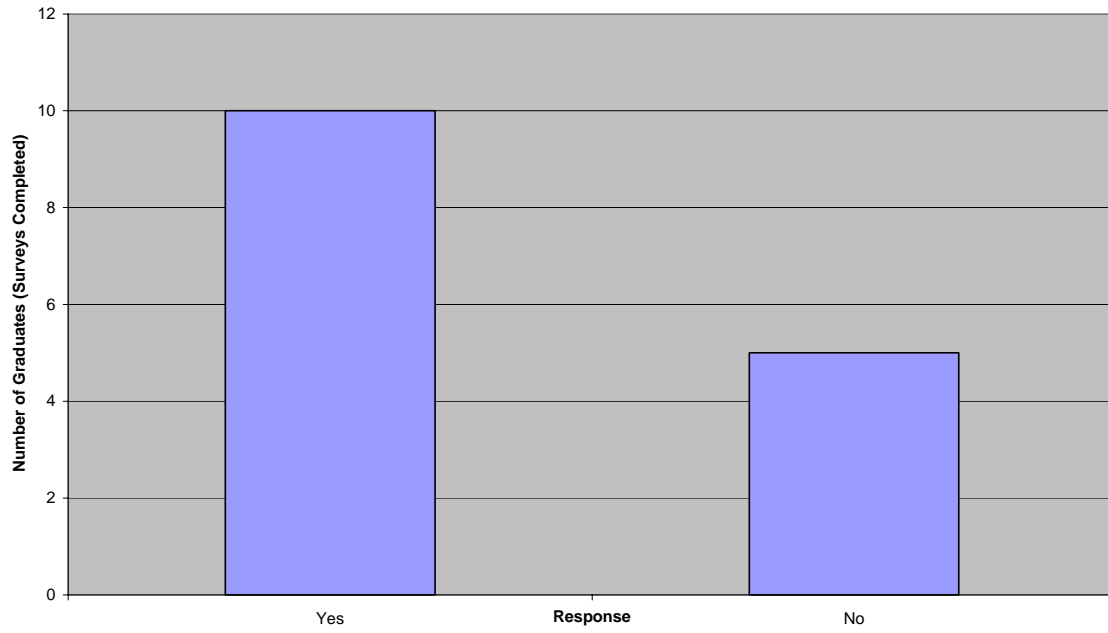
Was your first job in your field of study?

Figure 4: Graph displaying whether or not respondents first job was in their field of study.

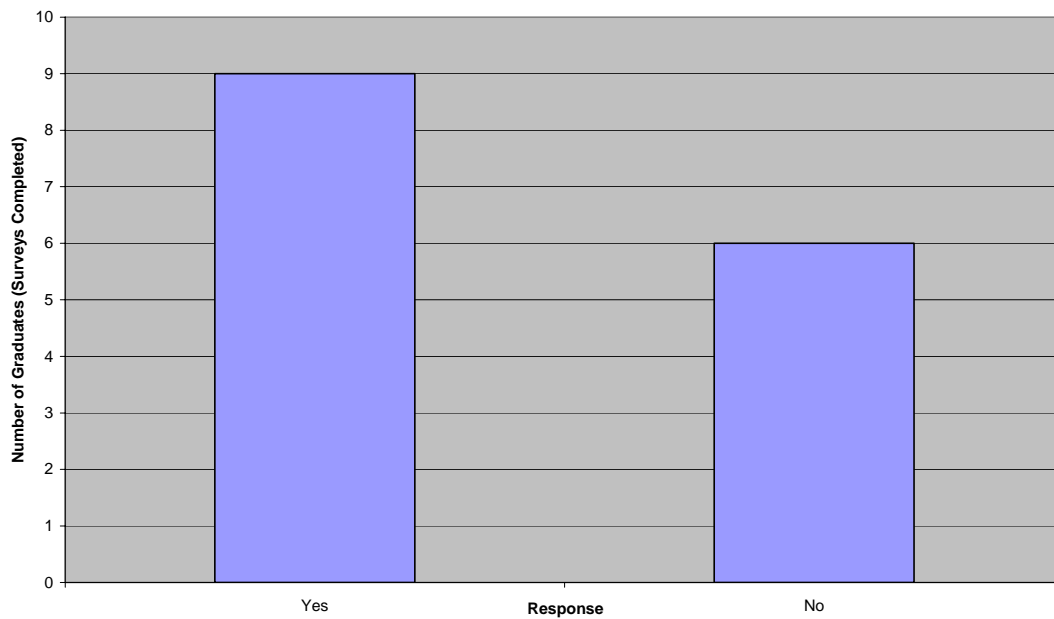**Is your current employment in the field of study that you recieved your degree in?**

Figure 5: Graph displaying whether respondents current employment is in the field of study they received their degree in.
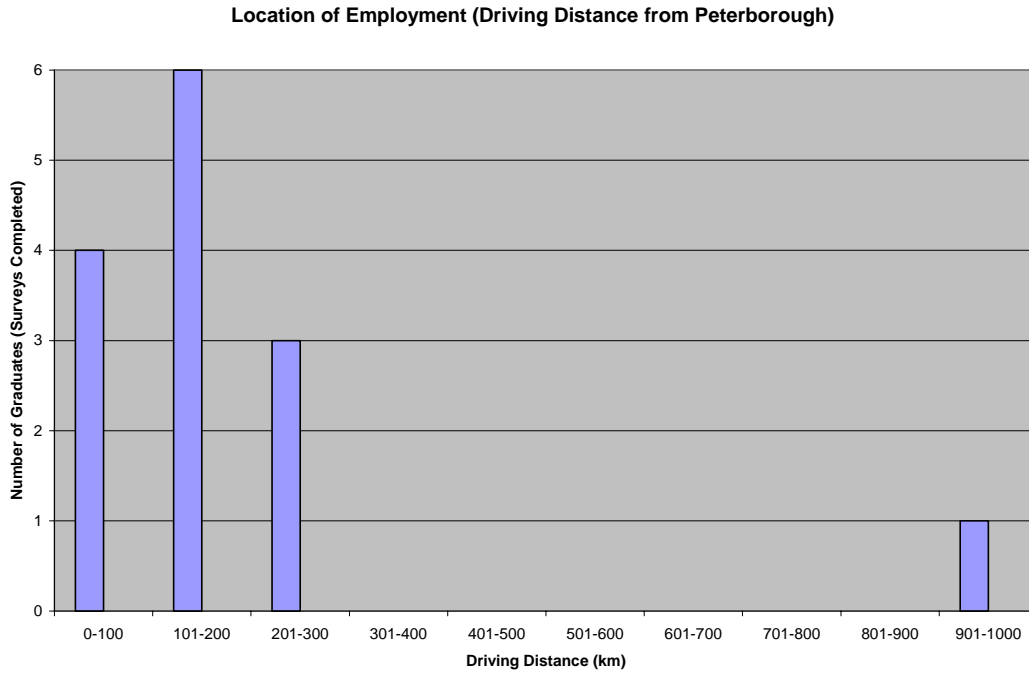
Location of Employment (Driving Distance from Peterborough)

Figure 6: Graph displaying respondents location of employment calculated by driving distance from Peterborough

Did the skills and knowledge you attained from Trent University help you obtain your job?
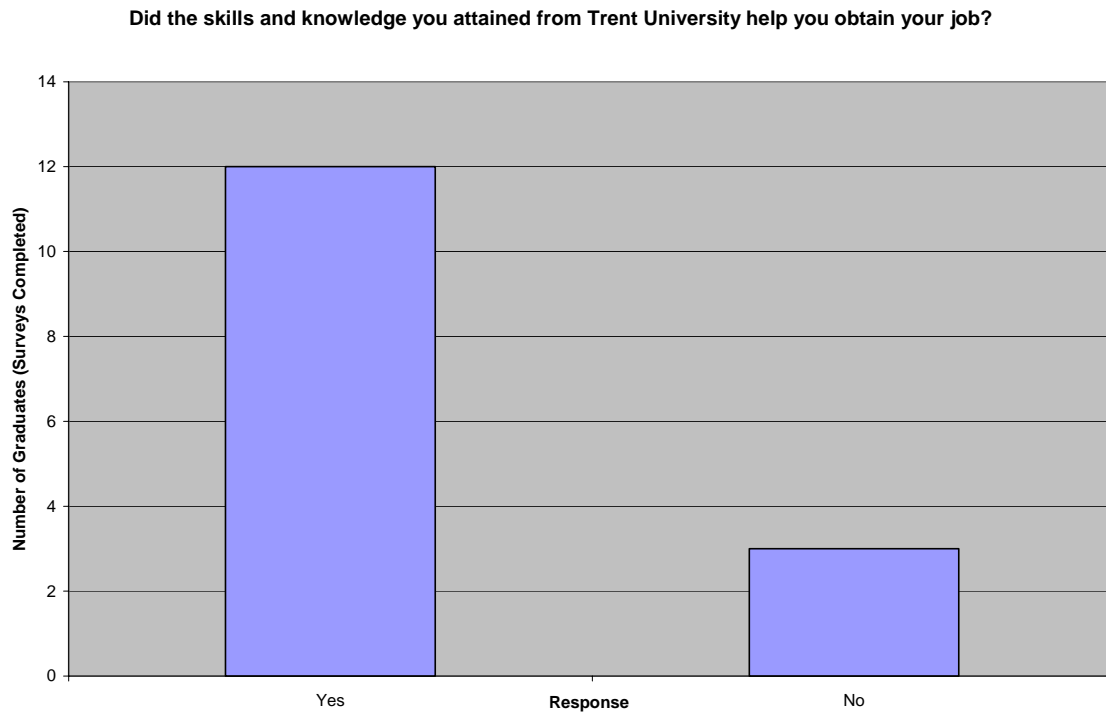

Figure 7: Graph displaying whether the skills the respondents attained from Trent helped them obtain their job.

Current respondent's income range is displayed in Figure 8. The income range for all the respondents is fairly spread out, with no single income range dominating. Twenty-seven percent of respondents are making thirty-thousand dollars or less, thirty-three percent of respondents are making thirty to fifty-thousand dollars, twenty percent are making fifty to seventy-thousand dollars, and twenty percent are making over seventy-thousand dollars a year. This data presents no correlation between a geography degree and any specific income range.

Figure 9 examines the graduate's satisfaction with their Trent education based on four broad categories. All respondents agreed (forty-seven percent strongly agreed) with the statement that Trent improved their ability to think analytically and logically. Ninety-three percent of respondents agreed (twenty-seven percent strongly agreed) that Trent taught them to present ideas and information effectively when speaking to others. The majority of people agreed (thirty-three percent strongly agreed) that Trent developed their ability to function as a member of a team. Thirteen percent of respondents disagreed with this statement, these were the only disagreements with any of the statements. This signalled that perhaps group work is not emphasized as much as people would like to prepare them for the working environment. Ninety-three percent agreed (forty percent strongly agreed) that Trent developed their ability to learn on their own, pursue ideas and find the information that they needed. Even though these categories are a broad assessment of the educational experience at Trent, it can be concluded that Trent is performing very well in these areas due to the lack of disagreements with these statements.
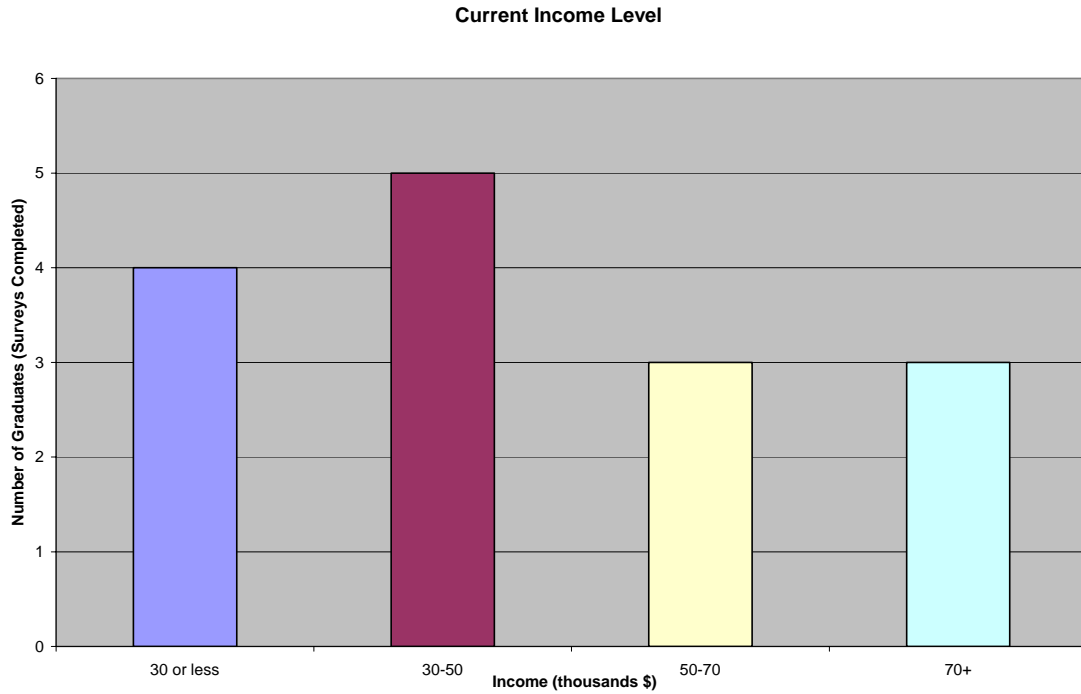
Current Income Level

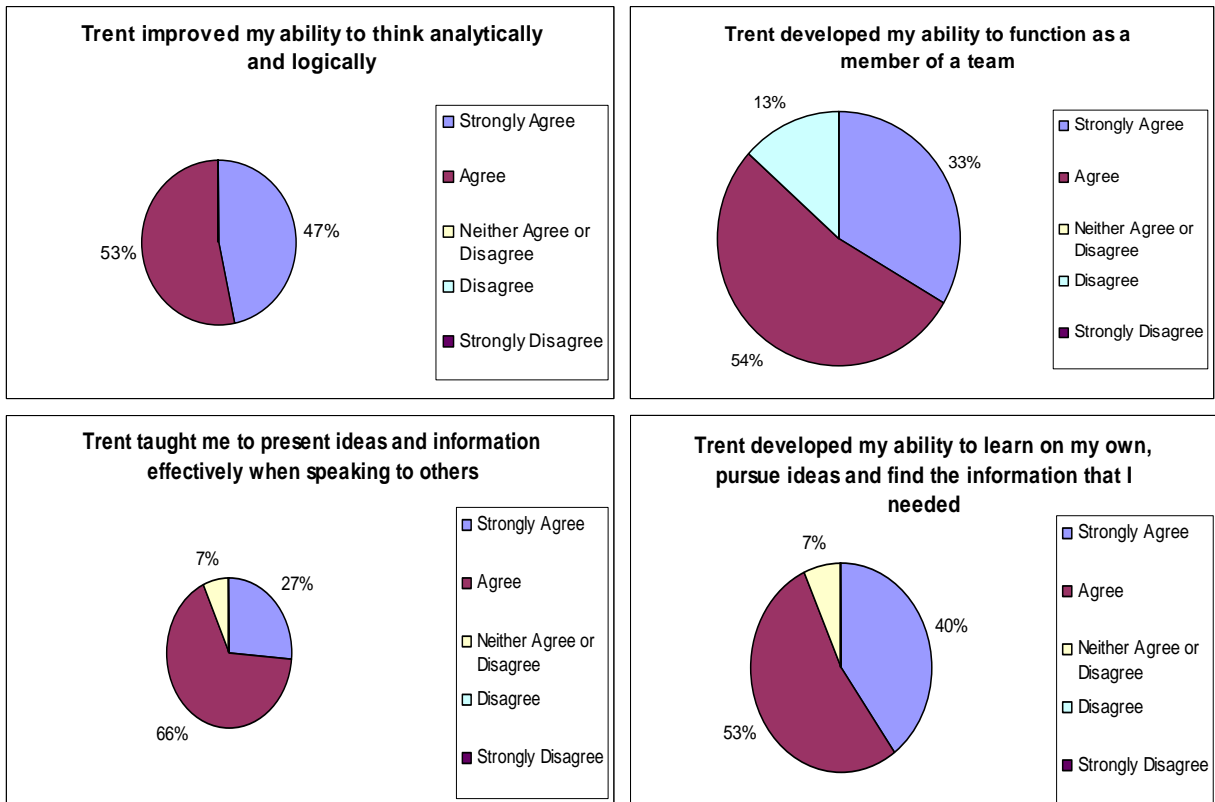Figure 8: Graph dispalying the current income level of respondents.

Figure 9: Graphs displaying respondents satisfactions to educational aspects

Would you be willing to fill out a larger survey if one was to take place?

No
7%

Yes
93%

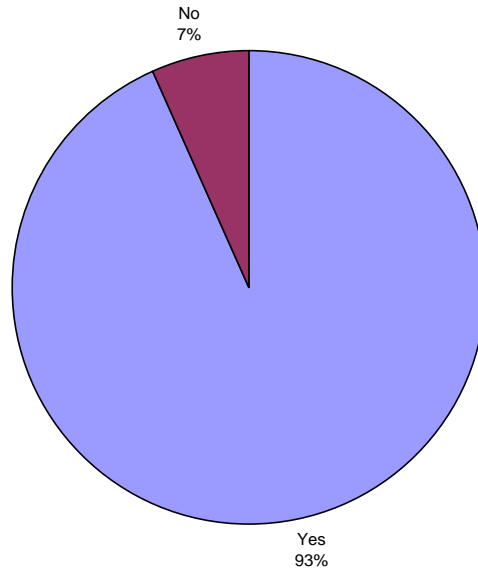**Figure 10: Graph shows whether or not respondents were willing to fill out a larger survey.**

Which survey method would you prefer?

Number of Graduates (Surveys Completed)

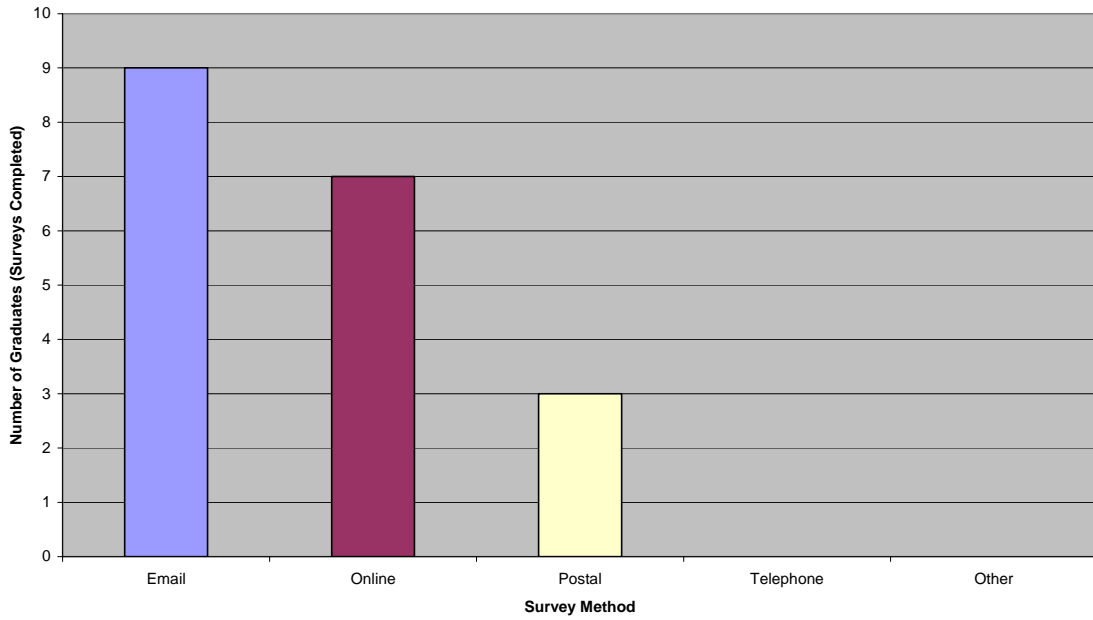|				
Email	Online	Postal	Telephone	Other

Survey Method

Figure 11: Graph shows which survey method respondents would prefer for a larger survey if one were to occur.

When asked whether or not respondents would like to participate in a larger survey if one were to be administered, all but one respondent was willing to fill out a larger survey (Figure 10). Even though this was such a small sample, most respondents were willing to complete a larger survey, which is very encouraging. This is an encouraging fact for Trent, if they were to go ahead and complete a full survey or any other survey graduates would be willing to answer their questions and help the school out. Figure 11 shows the preferred survey administration method if a larger survey were to take place, respondents could answer as many of the options as they liked. The majority of people preferred to be surveyed over the computer either by email (forty-seven percent) or online (thirty-seven percent). These two methods are the easiest to complete as people can complete them at their leisure. They are also the cheapest and easiest to distribute to people. Postal (sixteen percent) was the only other response, and telephone got zero responses. This could show a change in the way that people like to be surveyed.

The data from each of the three individual years was not graphed or analyzed due to the low individual responses from each separate year and the small sample sizes. Due to the fact that such a small database was not expected, a smaller sample size had to be used than originally planned. Due to the small sample size it was hard to complete a lot of surveys from some years, such as contacting the graduates from the 2000 entry year, only a few people were contacted and responded. It is unfair to make generalizations based on only a few people, so unfortunately the data could not be compared across the three years. The response rates differed between the three different entry years, this can be due to the information provided by the database. In 1990 the response rate was 35%,

for 1995 it was 25%, and for 2000 the response rate was 15%. A reason that the response rate for 2000 was so low could be the fact that these graduates have only been out of school for three to four years and have not contacted the university with new contact information. These people are still looking at settling down and finding a permanent career and place to live. The higher response rate for 1990 can be attributed to the fact that people have settled down and live in a more permanent location, and are more likely to have their contact information updated with the university.

The overall response rate of the survey was 25% which is very encouraging for a first time telephone survey. Due to such a small sample size data could not be examined independently by cohort. All analyzed data is a total of all three cohorts. The majority of respondents went on to pursue further education after graduation from Trent. With the majority of them also securing themselves a job within four months of graduation from Trent. Of all respondents sixty percent are currently employed in the field of study that they received their degree in. The majority of respondents agree that the skills that they obtained at Trent helped them in obtaining their current employment. As well respondents are happy with the educational experience that Trent provided them. All but one of the respondents were willing to fill out a larger survey if one were to take place, with the most preferred method of administration being online or via email. Taking these results and trends from the survey Trent can be encouraged that they are providing students with education that is useful in making them employable immediately after graduation in their chosen field of study. The high response rate and willingness to participate in a larger survey is encouraging for Trent, if they were to pursue a larger survey in the future.

Discussion

The following sections will discuss the test survey from its beginning in research to its completion and the analysis of the data.

Survey Design

When creating the test survey there were many ideas that had to be taken into consideration. Initially, the test survey involved brainstorming potential questions that could be used. Our host provided ideas and items that the Career Centre wanted answered which provided a starting point for narrowing potential questions down. It was important to select and use questions that were relevant to this particular test survey to gather the most relevant and accurate data. Once questions that were pertinent to this study were generated based on ideas from the Career Centre a chance to look at what other schools were asking gave an opportunity to reveal if any important questions were left out. Looking at surveys from other universities was beneficial because it aided in the wording of questions as well as in choosing which format each question should take. An example of this was using a range to describe people's income as opposed to asking for an exact figure. It is important to note that the design of the test survey was kept align with the idea of conducting it over the phone, as this was the chosen method of dissemination. It should be noted that survey design was undertaken with all group members in this study, as multiple inputs help ensure the quality of question design and to prevent awkward wording of questions that may not be understood by respondents.

Based on previous research from the literature review, it was decided that a telephone survey would be the easiest, most efficient and cost effective method to conduct the test survey. With a telephone survey in mind it was aimed to develop a user-

friendly survey that could be easily administered by members in the group and would be easy for participants to answer. This means that a survey that was easy to read and complete and only required simple answers from the participants would be the most beneficial. If a survey was very straightforward and easy to understand participants would be more than willing to participate. With a simple survey to administer, it allows for smoother data analysis. After completing the test survey designs there were some questions that were no longer necessary, such as a question asking about people's marital status. Some of the questions that were asked yielded data that did not find relevant information due to small sample size. However, the questions and the data collected would be more beneficial when a larger sample size is used. While conducting the test survey it was also noted that one question in particular would have been better if it had been divided into two questions. Question 7a should have asked the individuals current job title and then had a part b which then asked where there current job was located. Being more specific in what was being asked in these questions would have gathered more accurate data for the study.

Conducting Test Survey

There were some issues that were encountered when conducting the test survey. The first was that calls were only able to be conducted for the test survey on certain evenings between the hours of 6:30 and 8:30pm. This was in part to the availability of resources and because it was a time when most people would be home and while they were not eating dinner and did not want to be calling too late in the evening and disturbing people. Originally the idea of being able to make the phone calls any night of the week and after discussion with our host it was determined that she had to be there

when making the calls for security reasons. This created an obstacle when trying to reach participants because calls could only be made to them during certain hours and days. Arrangements had to be made in order to secure appropriate times and days that matched the hosts schedule to allow for three group members to make calls.

Another issue that related to available calling times was the difference in time zones. We encountered some individuals in our database that lived in other parts of the world and calls could not be made to them due the differences in time. This also applies to individuals who now reside overseas who could not be reached because it would have been very late at night when making the calls. These time zone restrictions limited the people that were available to contact and perhaps excluded what may have been very valuable information about their career paths and what led them to move out of Ontario.

Fortunately, there was a nice quiet environment to conduct test survey calls in which was very beneficial. The Career Centre was available after hours and were provided with three phones on which calls could be made. This enabled completion of the test survey faster then had initially expected, thus putting the project ahead of schedule. It also created a nice environment to work in especially since many of group members were apprehensive about conducting the test survey. A challenge that we had to anticipate was that people were not going to participate in the test survey or answer the calls and were nervous about how that would impact the project. For many group members it was the first time conducting a telephone survey which created nervousness. It was found that the geography alumni were very willing to participate in our survey. Very few individuals said they were not willing to participate and some who were busy requested that a call back to them the next evening when they would be able to complete the test survey. It

was felt that perhaps people were willing to complete the survey because it was students conducting a research project and that they sympathized because they have done similar projects themselves. An example of this was that people were very willing to give personal information about themselves such as income. This was perhaps in part because they knew the information was going to remain anonymous and would help students in a project. Also, many people asked about the geography courses and professors and it was evident there is still a connection between the alumni and the school.

Some negative aspects in conducting the test survey were that there was a lot of wrong numbers in the database given by the alumni association at Trent. This limited the population of people that could be surveyed and thus limited the responses gathered. Having a smaller sample population did not allow the opportunity to follow the career paths of as many geography alumni as was initially hoped but still managed to achieve a relatively high response rate. Also, the preamble that was written which was stated at the beginning of each phone call was too long in length. Perhaps it contained too much information which could have been simplified. In conducting the survey we felt that our question number nine was a little too complicated for asking in a telephone survey. The confused nature of the question had some participants asking to restate the options or perhaps not putting as much thought into the responses as. The design would have benefited more in a postal or online survey where a person would be able to look over their options at each question and then think about which would best suit their response.

Alumni Database

The Alumni Association at Trent University provided a database of information on geography graduates that were used for the test survey. The host at the Career Centre provided specific years of alumni to call during the test survey. The host approached the Alumni Association to inquire about the database and then gather the data. The database that was given the alumni association was lacking in many respects. The first issue encountered was that Trent University groups alumni by the year they entered Trent and not by their year of graduation, which is different and uncommon in comparison to other universities. This changed the output of students in the database providing more recent graduates then originally intended. Initially graduating students from the years 1990, 1995 and 2000 were to be investigated, since unaware of the coding of Alumni in the database, we were looking at students that had graduated more recently. This meant that the most recent graduates had only been out of school for three years in some cases and had not been in the workforce or desired career path for very long.

Another issue with the database was that the information on it was not up to date. It was found that there were a large number of wrong numbers as well as one individual who had passed away, which made for at times a trying experience. There needs to be a method implemented to track more recent graduates and to keep the information up to date. Perhaps giving students an alumni email upon graduation would provide a means to not only track their movements thus benefiting alumni services but that it could also inform alumni about events occurring at Trent that they are welcome to participate in as well as act as a means to deliver future alumni surveys. The final issue was in the amount of time that it took to actually obtain the database itself. There was a waiting period of

over two weeks to get a copy of the database. If the wait was much longer for the database it may not have been possible to successfully complete the survey on time and analyze the data. If the database did take longer, it may have been rushed to complete the test survey.

Reflections on the Test Survey

When looking back on the test survey from development to implementation and completion it is evident that there was a great deal of work involved. It was necessary to properly research what other universities were doing in terms of gathering information that had been completed on their alumni to create a starting point for an alumni survey at Trent. Creating questions and deciding upon their order in the survey was the most difficult part. Wording of questions was a very big concern as it impacts the responses that will be received and was laboured over greatly. The length of the test survey was kept short in length and therefore questions were created that would obtain the maximum amount of data. It combined many aspects of survey design while trying to keep in mind the needs of our host.

Conducting the survey and analyzing data was the more enjoyable part of the test survey. It gave us a sense of satisfaction that we had accomplished something and would perhaps make an impact on the future of alumni surveys at Trent University. However, there was disappointment once the survey conduction was complete. Only receiving 15 responses giving us an overall response rate of 25%, prevented comparison of the data across the three entry years chosen. This is because making generalizations, for example, using the sample size of three for the 2000 entry year would be biased and non-representative. This was an unfortunate outcome of this study but is a useful learning

experience for Trent, if it proceeds to conduct an alumni survey. The data that was generated provided useful data on alumni opinions of Trent as well as alumni's employment and its relation to their Trent experience. Most importantly, there was sense of the willingness of alumni to participate in surveys which is essential if Trent is to successfully undertake a larger survey yielding a high response rate.

CONCLUSIONS

Recommendations

The following recommendations being made for Trent University are based on the literature review and the test study that was conducted.

1. Adopt a Digital Approach.

After reviewing the methods that other institutions are using to administer their surveys, the trend towards more online approaches emerges. Increasingly institutions are choosing to conduct surveys digitally (email or online), and it has yielded high response rates. This point is reinforced when looking at data collected in the test survey conducted for this study. When asked what the preferred method of survey administration is, the response favoured digital methods (84%).

One benefit is the saved cost by administration over the internet. There is no need for paper, envelopes, and stamps required to send out surveys. Surveys can be hosted on existing institutional web space. Another associated benefit is digital formats eliminate the use of paper which is a concern in today's growing environmentally minded society. Digital surveys are very handy as most people are connected to the internet. Many people use 'snail mail' less and less as digital methods are much faster to communicate through and much more convenient. Conducting surveys electronically also creates an environment where it is easier and faster to send follow-up reminders out, and responses can be collected faster. Finally, digital survey conduction saves the need for expenses required to pay staff to sit and enter data into the computer as the data is already in electronic format.

2. Improve Trent's Database.

This study found that the alumni database, at least for the geography undergraduates that fall into the three years chosen, was insufficiently updated. There were many wrong numbers, and some numbers no longer reached the person in question but, for example, were the phone numbers of parent's houses. In order to improve the response rate to produce a successful survey the database needs to be more regularly updated.

Trent should look into collecting email addresses of graduates to enter into the database. Doing this would make it much easier to conduct a digital survey as there could be fast communication between the school and graduate regarding such survey. Also this would be useful if a survey was to be conducted using email for obvious reasons. It is a difficult issue because email addresses change on a regular basis and there is no provincially or nationally issued email account that one uses all the time. The next point is an attempt to counter this problem.

3. Alumni Emails and The Alumni Magazine

In keeping with the digital theme Trent may want to look into issuing alumni email addresses. An alumni email address would attempt to keep the graduate connected with the school, and would provide them with a useful service as almost everyone uses email. In order to foster its use the school could send news and information about upcoming events through email. Another way to foster the use of the emails would be to create an electronic version of the alumni magazine. For the electronic version it may be beneficial to break up the magazine into smaller parts and send them on a more regular basis in order to ensure regular use of the account.

Email forwarding is also a technique the school may promote. Almost all email accounts have an option where you can forward received emails to another email account, and Trent should advertise this option to graduates in case they may not like the idea of using their alumni email.

4. Administer Surveys Through Academic Departments

In conducting this survey it was found that a very small number of people contacted were not interested in the survey. The majority of people were very happy to fill it out to aid in this research. One conclusion that was speculated from this data was that people still felt connected to the academic department that they earned their degree in. If so, administering surveys through academic departments is a useful tool to try and increase the response rate. The survey could either be a generic school wide survey that is simply distributed by the departments with a departmental 'face' on it, or they could be developed and conducted by each department individually. A recommendation on that however is unwarranted based on this research. One complication that arises when administering surveys based on academic departments is the joint-major degree. Communication would be needed between the two departments in order to ensure two of the same or similar surveys are not sent to the same person.

5. Information Card at Graduation

Wilfred Laurier University employs a system where at the graduation ceremony they hand out an information card that is to be filled out by the graduates. It requests current, and if possible future, contact information for the graduate. If a card is not

filled out the school follows-up with graduate with information they have on file shortly after the graduation ceremony. Laurier records a response rate of 75-80% with this method; they begin updating their database very effectively starting at the graduation ceremony. The one problem that arises is that cards are not received by those who do not attend the graduation ceremony, but again this effect can be mitigated by the attempt to initiate contact with the graduate within a short time frame after graduation.

6. Develop Surveys with Multiple Inputs

Surveys are best designed in a group atmosphere. The design of questions that are understandable and that will yield the desired response is essential, and is best achieved when many people are present. This way questions can be read aloud to a group, and all can give feedback on whether the wording is unusual, difficult, and suggestions for changes can be made.

7. Perform Pilot Survey Before Full Scale Administration

If Trent is to implement a large scale graduate survey that is not broken up based on academic departments, then a pilot survey is essential to ensure that graduates from all departments are able to provide responses that yield the desired information. Pilot surveys are useful in general because they ensure money is not wasted on the conduction of surveys that produce no meaningful data.

8. If Response Rates are Low, Investigate Incentives

If Trent conducts a graduate survey and finds that the response rate is low or lower than desired, they should look into the use of an incentive. Incentives can take

the form of cash payments, electronic payments or prize draws and have been shown

to increase response rates, very significantly in the case of cash payments.

Research Questions:

Is an alumni study at Trent feasible?

Yes

The test survey shows that 93% of respondents are willing to fill out a larger

survey if one was to take place. However the feasibility of survey conduction is very

dependent on the quality of the population being surveyed. Trent will need to keep its

alumni database up to date in order to achieve a high response rate and enough responses

so that the data is useful and is representative of the entire Trent community.

Is an alumni study at Trent useful?

Yes

Information obtained in an alumni survey can serve a variety of purposes. Firstly

it serves current students in providing examples of what they can do with their degree and

what it can do for them. It can aid the Career Centre in improving the quality of

information it gives to students regarding topics such as careers and further education.

The information can be used as an assessment tool for the school. It can evaluate how

well the school is performing by looking at for example how satisfied graduates are with

their education or by examining whether they found their Trent degree useful. From this

kind of data Trent can make any necessary changes or improvements where they are

determined to be necessary. Conducting a survey also results in the collection of

graduates most recent contact information which can then be used to keep the alumni

database up to date.