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Quality of general ed generally satisfactory.

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Regional

Quality of general ed generally satisfactory

During the last few years, media have inundated us with bad news about higher education. Whether it is student debt, sexual assaults, or decreased enrollments, colleges and universities seem to be under siege. Add to that the bad press from op-ed writers about political correctness, uselessness of certain degrees, and the fascination with technological fads such as MOOCs, and one can see how controversial higher education has become.

Apparently, someone forgot to ask students what they think.

Now a new national study seems to take care of that. According to a survey conducted with Gallup and Strada Educational Network that drew nearly 90,000 respondents, the quality of the education former students received is not a major concern for most American college goers. This survey shows that four of five respondents who completed a credential or degree program said they received a high-quality education, ranging from 81 percent of vocational or technical credential holders, as well as associate degree holders, to 95 percent among graduate degree holders. Not only that, but 70 percent of respondents who attended college but did not complete said they received a high-quality education.

This is important for several reasons. To begin with, this is the first time that the most fundamental question – student satisfaction – has been asked at the national level for all disciplines, including people who, for whatever reason, did not graduate. Interestingly, this is a question never scientifically explored by the plethora of rankings that are published every year and whose meanings are doubtful

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

at best.

The other important aspect is that although the general level of satisfaction is high, there is obviously room for improvement. So, we need to look at what can be done to achieve higher levels of satisfaction, and that is up to colleges and universities to do through better analysis of exit interviews of their graduates.

There are other aspects of this Gallup-Strada Educational Network survey that need to be looked into. For example, more than half of respondents said that they would have changed at least one of these three decisions if they could do it all over again: their major, college attended or credential pursued. The most common regret was their choice of major, with 36 percent saying they wish they would have chosen differently. Twenty-eight percent of respondents said they would have chosen a different institution, while 12 percent said they would pursue a different degree.

Regarding their choice of major, 40 percent who pursued or completed a bachelor's degree would pick a different field of study compared to 31 percent of those who hold a technical or vocational certificate. These results suggest that people pursuing a higher education degree made the decisions about a major, institution or level of degree without appropriate information that included, but was not limited to, "an understanding of employment

opportunities, earning potential or the implications of long-term student debt," according to the report. Also, it seems that many had a faulty understanding of what the major they chose was really all about or what skills they really learned while mastering those subjects.

Not surprisingly, respondents who attended graduate or vocational programs were the least regretful, since both are narrower in scope and students are more clear about what they want.

Thus, we need to make sure that we provide as ample and accurate information to incoming students as possible. To that end, we need to go beyond posting facts and figures on a website to a more personalized approach. Many institutions will hesitate to do that because of the cost.

In any case, although there is room for improvement, we should not fool ourselves about trying to achieve perfection. Most students make institutional choices based on location and cost, so for many the choices are limited. Another factor that we should not forget is that, according to this survey, respondents who attended college but did not receive a degree were the most likely to say they would change at least one of the three educational decisions mentioned earlier. After all, according to federal statistics, students who take out loans for college but never graduate are three times more likely to default. Not surprisingly, respondents with more student loan debt said they would make different decisions.

However, there was very little variation by debt level among respondents on whether they would pursue a different major, with an overall 3

percentage point range across all five quintiles of debt level. But large debt holders were more likely to say they would attend a different institution or pursue a different type of degree.

This is also an incentive for academic departments to come up with better marketing approaches in order to make sure that they attract the students that are more likely to succeed in their disciplines. This approach would serve to increase retention and graduation rates, which have become a benchmark for funding of public institutions.

This survey is expected to be carried out on an annual basis from now on, so it will provide a timeline perspective of how things are (or are not) changing through time. Gallup and Strada have said that the report would be the first of many from a three-year survey, dubbed as the "Education Consumer Pulse." The survey will be conducted daily, with a goal of asking 360,000 current, past and prospective college students about their experiences in higher education.

This "Education Consumer Pulse" should certainly help to provide a much better picture of what we need to improve higher education nationwide, certainly a more useful tool than meaningless rankings. The current survey can be read in full at <http://stradaeducation.gallup.com>.

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