

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

UNIVERSITY SENATE
STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

February 25, 2014

MEMORANDUM FOR JOE IENUSO

FROM: Matthew Chou and Akshay Shah

SUBJECT: Institutionalizing University-Wide Student Quality of Life Survey

In April 2013, the Student Affairs Committee (SAC) of the University Senate completed Columbia's first-ever University-wide Quality of Life (QoL) survey. Over 6,250 students from across Columbia's 20 schools and affiliated institutions took the survey, which addressed a broad spectrum of wellness considerations including financial aid, housing, social life, academics, and administration.

Given that multiple types and levels of stakeholders—trustees, deans, students, and faculty—have already found value in the survey's unique breadth of data and its accompanying analysis, we believe that this survey can empower decision-making and further Columbia's vision of being the world's greatest institution of higher education. Institutionalizing the survey is key, as SAC alone cannot sustainably front the resources and manpower required.

This memo will first briefly review the QoL survey's unique merits and then present a proposal for University support that will guarantee its success in the years to come.

Background

In administering the survey from its initial conception in April 2012 to its current state, SAC partnered with researchers affiliated with the Business School's Behavioral Research Lab. In addition, SAC incorporated generous feedback and support from the University Board of Trustees, the Office of the President, the Office of the Provost, fellow Senate committees, the Department of Statistics, school deans, multiple student organizations, and others.

SAC's survey is unique in four respects. First, while several schools and departments administer student satisfaction surveys of their own to evaluate their performance, or variations of such a survey for specific one-off needs, there has not been a comprehensive, campus-wide study including all of Columbia's 36,000 students until now. This survey allows for analysis by school and other demographics to find trends in specific pockets of the University, all while aiming to inspire a collaborative approach towards problem-solving.

Second, SAC plans to conduct this survey every two years, enabling longitudinal data analysis and the understanding of trends. This would also help the University determine the efficiency and impact of its policies.

Third, the survey aims to feed into high-level decision-making. For instance, SAC presented to the Trustees' subcommittee on student life in December 2013 and received broad support. Afterwards, at a meeting of the Committee of the Whole, trustees discussed the survey and cited

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some of its findings as informing their work. Altogether, this is a unique and holistic University-wide student dataset that Columbia's central administration can use to inform decisions.

Finally, SAC aims to make the survey dataset and its accompanying institutional analysis as open to the Columbia community as possible. Barring limitations from institutional review board (IRB) guidelines, we intend to buck of trend of creating proprietary datasets that are siloed within given administrative units.

Proposal

Starting in Spring 2015, our vision is to have the survey run every two years. To this end, we believe financial, technical, and logistical resources are required for four distinct sequential phases, namely:

1. Design and revision – Over time, some revision of survey questions will be necessary. Reasons for revision include dropping unnecessary questions so as to shorten the survey and adding questions that can drive additional insights. Changing questions appropriately requires technical expertise, particularly when it comes to determining which questions may be unnecessary (via statistical techniques like factor analysis).

Necessary Resources:

- Faculty member(s) and/or researcher(s) with expertise in survey instrument design.
2. Incentivizing and recording survey responses biennially – To ensure sufficient response rates, SAC fundraised about \$3,000 to purchase survey incentives (e.g. multiple gift cards and two iPad minis). In addition, thanks to the Provost's office, SAC was able to disseminate the survey with three University-wide emails to all 20 Columbia schools and affiliates. Lastly, SAC acquired the license to use the survey tool Qualtrics on a University-wide level through the Business School.

Necessary Resources:

- At least \$3,000 in survey incentives.
 - Multiple University-wide emails.
 - License rights for the survey tool Qualtrics.
3. Quantitative and qualitative analysis – This entailed cleaning a raw dataset, coding it to enable the generation of graphs and regression analysis, and drawing appropriate insights. That is, SAC had to (i) make the data usable, (ii) come up with what to ask the data, and then (iii) know how to appropriately interpret the technical analysis and qualitative responses. This phase requires the most time and technical expertise.

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Necessary Resources:

- About two man-months (340 hours) of high-level data analysis expertise, i.e. dataset management, OLS regression, and data visualization.
4. Making the analysis accessible and useful – All this work is for naught unless it is not only accessible but also useful to all members of the Columbia community. SAC attempted to meet these two goals by (i) creating presentations, topic-specific memos, and a general report for decision-makers, and (ii) meeting and working with as many people as possible to determine how the survey could be most useful to them. Please see the attached presentation and memos for examples of what SAC produced.

Necessary Resources:

- About one man-month (170 hours) to create and revise memos, presentations, and other ways of presenting key findings (e.g. an online visualization tool).
- Working with SAC to publicize and explain these findings to Columbia's multiple units.
- A website to host key documents and present the data-release protocol.
- Administrator(s) to handle inquiries and release data when appropriate.

Altogether, we therefore estimate that continuing the survey will require about 500 person-hours and \$3,000 every two years. Initial start-up costs in the Spring 2015 cycle will likely be higher due to the need to build up infrastructure and surmount the learning curve.

Conclusion

Columbia's mission is to "advance knowledge and learning at the highest level and to convey the products of its efforts to the world." Thus, the quality of life survey is not an end, but a means to understanding what we do well and where we can improve—and acting upon that information.

But to be on the forefront of knowledge and support a diverse and international student body, we believe that evidence-based decision-making is key. This appears especially true as "Big Data" and diverse forms of computation become increasingly relevant. We think there is a key space at Columbia for a transparent and rigorous student quality of life survey, and we hope you will join us in making it a lasting Columbia institution.

Enclosures:

Overview Powerpoint presentation
Example analysis memo

cc:

Student Affairs Committee
Prof. Sharyn O'Halloran, Chair of the Senate