

**Student Goal Analysis As an Outcomes Assessment  
for Noncredit Continuing Education Courses**

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The education of students taking noncredit continuing education courses at a community college is as much part of the American educational system as the education of students matriculated in a degree program at a community college. Noncredit courses are the type of education that for the most part is accessible to all, does not require formal admission procedures, and has few prerequisites other than someone's motivation and confidence that he or she can do the work (Bushnell, 1973; Cohen & Brawer, 1987; Eaton, 1987; Gleazer, 1980). Therefore, noncredit continuing education courses have the potential of having the most progressive role in the American education system. Personal and professional development courses can create an awareness of the cultural, spiritual, and psychological suppositions in one's life. These in turn can transform perspectives and open doors to other possibilities, creating a more fulfilled and richer life for many. There is so much about noncredit continuing education courses that is positive: the diversity of course offerings, the variety of learning options, the opportunity to satisfy personal and career goals, and open access to all.

Until recently, data on noncredit courses were not normally collected and reported by learning institutions (Young, 1987). In September 1988, a committee comprised of representatives of deans and directors of continuing education and institutional research departments of Maryland community colleges published (through the Maryland State Board for Community Colleges) the *Continuing Education Outcomes and Continuing Education Student Follow-Up Report*. These documents were a culmination of a comprehensive two-year study that established a framework to analyze student survey data on those students enrolled in noncredit courses at community colleges in the state of Maryland. One very important segment of the Maryland study was that of student opinions on goal attainment. The information collected on student goals provided data for assessment outcome measures of noncredit continuing education courses.

Because part of the mission of the community college is to meet the diverse needs of the community and the expressed needs of the individual (Gleazer, 1980; Vaughan, 1983, 1985), with whatever educational experiences seem to serve their need at that time (Cross, 1981), the belief that the end product of an education is a degree is not always true (Siatras, 1985). Warren (1985) noted that students who took community college courses for the purpose of satisfying a desire for personal growth or to expand their range of experience had very little concern about a degree or a certificate. He concludes that an educational assessment based solely on "general, long-term consequences such as completion of a bachelor's degree..., with little information on the students' initial purposes..., produces an incomplete picture" (p. 69). Therefore, student outcomes assessment for noncredit programs must evaluate student goals and goal achievement to provide meaningful results.

Students enroll in noncredit continuing education courses to achieve various goals. Knowledge of students' goals and their perceived attainment of those goals can help community colleges in developing course offerings and assessing course effectiveness, which in turn can better marketing research efforts. This article examines how one researcher conducted an assessment study of noncredit continuing education courses at a community college by identifying student goals and analyzing the attainment of those goals.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the study was to explore the effectiveness of noncredit continuing education courses offered at the Delaware Technical and Community College's Stanton/Wilmington campus by focusing on the students' perceptions of their primary enrollment goal and achievement of that goal. The data from this student outcomes assessment sheds light on the distinct population segments of the college's total market.

The design of the study was evaluation research, specifically descriptive research, using a survey research method to collect data. The population for this study consisted of 756 students enrolled in noncredit continuing education courses at the Stanton/Wilmington campus during the 1990 winter and spring quarters. In this study the researcher constructed a 17-item questionnaire with objective questions regarding student perception of primary goal, degree of goal attainment, recommendation of the course to others, along with questions pertaining to sociodemographic and personal data used to develop a student profile. The basis for developing this survey stemmed from the 1988 "Survey of Continuing Education Students Maryland Community Colleges" developed by a committee of deans and

directors of continuing education, directors of institutional research of the Maryland community colleges, and one external consultant (Maryland State Board of Community Colleges, 1988a, 1988b) for a comprehensive two-year study of noncredit continuing education courses within Maryland's community colleges. The researcher modified the survey to provide additional information on local conditions relevant only to the Stanton/Wilmington campus.

### **Findings**

To determine the extent to which noncredit courses actually resulted in desired outcomes, survey participants were asked to identify their primary goal for taking the noncredit course in which they were currently enrolled. A list of 15 goals was given to choose from in the survey in addition to an item entitled "other." The researcher designed the list of 15 goals based in part on those developed for the Maryland survey (Maryland State Board for Community Colleges, 1988a, 1988b) and in part on Morstain and Smart's (1974) research on motivational reasons for participation in adult education courses.

After stating their primary goal, survey participants were asked to rate the extent to which the course satisfied their goal. They were also asked whether they would recommend the course to others with the same goal. Student responses were analyzed by course category and by all courses grouped together. The course categories defined were professional development and personal development courses. Professional development courses were those designed to improve basic skills; prepare or train for a job; update job skills; or earn a degree, certificate, or continuing education units. Personal development courses were those designed to provide recreation, enhance personal growth, develop a hobby, or learn an art or craft. Categorization of courses can vary and should be based upon the types of courses offered and definitions determined within each community college under study.

### **Perceived Goal Analysis**

When survey participants were asked about their primary goal for enrolling in the noncredit course, the most frequent response given by almost 39% of the students was personal enrichment (See Table 1). This was followed by 13.5% who took the course to prepare for a different career, and 12.2% who wanted to update their skills for their current job. Of the job-related goals pertaining to a current job held, 20% indicated that it was a requirement, for advancement, or to update skills. Of the job-related goals pertaining to attainment of a first or different job, a response of 16.1% was given. The total respondents indicating a job-related goal was 36.1%. In addition, 10.1% of

the respondents have other goals for enrolling in the noncredit continuing education course including a variety of personal and job-related interests, spiritual and self-growth interests, and in some cases, courses were taken to achieve monetary savings on a product or service. The study also provided students with the opportunity to select the goal of returning to a classroom atmosphere to ultimately earn a degree or certificate, with half that number specifying the goal of ultimately earning a degree. These findings support the researcher's review of the literature that contends that the intent for taking noncredit continuing education courses is not to earn a degree, and that many of the students already have a degree (Gleazer, 1980). Over 40% of the students surveyed in this study had already earned at least an associate's degree.

#### **Goal Achievement Assessment**

Student goal achievement is an important outcomes measure that helps assess the extent to which noncredit courses actually result in the desired student goal. Therefore, survey participants were asked to rate the degree to which the course in which they were currently enrolled was satisfying their stated goal. The overwhelming majority in this study, almost 90% of the students, indicated that the course either satisfied or highly satisfied their goal. Only 1% indicated that they were dissatisfied with the extent to which the noncredit course met their stated goal.

#### **Analysis of Course Recommendations**

Considering the level of satisfaction with goal attainment, it is not surprising that the majority of students enrolled in a noncredit continuing education course would recommend the course to other students with the same goal. The study revealed that 92.2% of the students would recommend the course to others, 1.5% would not recommend the course to others, and 6.4% were not sure or did not respond.

#### **Discussion**

The findings of this study impart an understanding of the goals of students taking noncredit courses, creating valuable information that can be applied towards assessing student outcomes. Knowing why students enroll in noncredit courses and their level of goal attainment not only supplies assessment information, but provides helpful marketing research insights.

This study enabled Delaware Technical and Community College to better understand different segments of the college's noncredit population. According to the student's stated goal, the noncredit student population is divided into the following segments:

**Personal Enrichers.** Those who specified that they enrolled

in the course for personal enrichment reasons outranked all other segments at 38.9% of the total population of noncredit students. Of this 38.9%, 34.4% were enrolled in a personal development course and 4.6% were enrolled in a professional development course.

**Job Seekers/Enrichers.** Those who were preparing for their first career or a different career, updating their skills in their current job, preparing for a promotion in their current job, or satisfying a requirement to maintain their current job ranked second of the goal segments at 36.1%. Of this 36.1%, 31.6% were enrolled in a professional development course and 4.5% were enrolled in a personal development course.

**Certificate/Degree Seekers.** Those who took a noncredit course to ultimately earn a certificate or degree were 4.7% of the goal segment, of which 2.6% were seeking a certificate and 2.1% a degree. Of the 4.7%, 3.9% were enrolled in a professional development course and .9% were enrolled in a personal development course.

**Cognitive/Cultural Enrichers.** Those who sought mental fulfillment or cultural appreciation accounted for 4.8% of the goal segment. Of this 4.8%, 4% were enrolled in a personal development course and .8% were enrolled in a professional development course.

**Socializers.** Those seeking to meet other people or relieve boredom were 2.4% of the goal segment, with 2.2% enrolled in a personal development course and .2% enrolled in a professional development course.

**Community Servers.** Those who desired to serve the community better accounted for 1.5% of the goal segment, with .8% enrolled in a professional development course and .7% enrolled in personal development course.

**Other Achievers.** Aside from the 10.4% that explained a multitude of "other" reasons for taking a noncredit course or did not respond (divided almost equally between those taking personal or professional development courses), 1.3% of the goal segment were those who enrolled in the course at the request of another person (1.2% professional development courses and .1% personal development courses).

### **Conclusion**

Analyzing student goal data enables community colleges to divide their noncredit student population into distinct segments. Understanding why students enroll provides the information needed to develop specific market plans. Knowing student goal achievement provides information to assess the effectiveness of noncredit courses. Community colleges that want to assess noncredit student outcomes must be able to identify student goals

and attainment of those goals by developing a systematic evaluation process. To begin, a method to collect data on student goals must be established. This study utilized a survey research method that was effective not only in collecting data on student goals and attainment of those goals, but also in collecting data on the sociodemographic characteristics of the students. This method was found to be effective because it captured the phenomena of the moment. The data could also be collected in two stages: at registration and upon the conclusion of the course as part of a course evaluation. It would be necessary to collect student perception of goal attainment for outcome assessment purposes towards the end of the course preferably when the class is in session to assure student accessibility. This two-stage method of collecting data would also require coordination of the data collected at the time of registration with the data collected upon conclusion of the course. Because course evaluations are conducted upon the conclusion of many noncredit continuing education courses, it would lessen the amount of paperwork if a survey instrument were combined with the course evaluation form. One instrument could be designed that would collect information to develop a student profile and assess noncredit courses as perceived by the student, including the quality of instruction and administration.

Pertinent objective type questions to include on an instrument to assess noncredit outcomes are as follows:

- What is your primary goal?
- To what degree did the course satisfy your goal?
- Would you recommend the course to others with the same goal?
- How many sessions did you attend?
- Did you take the course to earn continuing education units?

Other data that should be collected via the instrument pertain to employment status, current job title, level of income, level of education, time lapsed since education level attained, gender, ethnicity, and age. This information will enable the development of a student profile that can be used to analyze the sociodemographic characteristics of the students currently enrolled for future marketing efforts. A comparison of the current student population against the census information for the area is another useful way to determine whether the students represent a fair share of the existing market segment.

Community colleges that analyze student outcomes for noncredit courses will know whether the courses are delivering a product that is satisfying and meeting the needs of the students in accordance with their stated goals. Hence, their ability to

capitalize on the development and marketing of the courses offered will be greater than those community colleges that do not measure student outcomes. Gessner (1987) states that "data obtained from a self-study can be used to determine an institution's niche in the marketplace through the development of a strategic marketing plan" (p.235). To assure that noncredit continuing education courses are effective and meeting the needs of the community, a continued and systematic program for reviewing student goals and perceived achievement is a necessary component of outcomes assessment.

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Table 1

Student Assessment of Primary Goal by Course Category (N=756)

Primary Goal	Course Category		Total %
	Professional %	Personal %	
Personal enrichment	4.6	34.3	38.9
Prepare for different career	11.4	2.1	13.5
Update skills for current job	10.9	1.3	12.2
Other	4.7	5.4	10.1
Required to keep job	3.9	0.1	4.0
Advance in current job	3.0	0.8	3.8
Learn for sake of learning	0.7	2.9	3.6
Prepare for first career	2.4	0.2	2.6
Get back into school and ultimately earn certificate	2.2	0.4	2.6
Relief of boredom	0.1	1.8	1.9
Serve the community better	0.8	0.7	1.5
Comply with request of others	1.2	0.1	1.3
Fulfill cultural interest	0.1	1.1	1.2
Get back into school and ultimately earn 2-year degree	0.8	0.4	1.2
Get back into school and ultimately earn 4-year degree	0.9	0.0	0.9
Meet other people	0.1	0.4	0.5
No response	0.2	0.1	0.3
Total	48.0	52.1	100.1*

\*Percentages in total column do not equal 100 percent because of rounding.