

UW-Stout Launches Applied Research Center to Help Universities with Survey Needs

Staff members of the University of Wisconsin-Stout Office of Budget, Planning and Analysis have a reputation for conducting precise and valuable surveys on campus. The office plays a key role in UW-Stout's commitment to continuous quality improvement, which requires good data on which to base decisions.

Now the budget office is branching out by creating the UW-Stout Applied Research Center, known as ARC, to help other institutions of higher education with their survey needs.

Meridith Wentz, budget office director, said the research center grew out of a need that other institutions have for survey data but that don't have the ability to conduct surveys on their own. The ARC will provide benchmark surveys on student engagement, mobile technology, exit interviews and alumni outcomes, she said. Surveys also can be customized to suit the needs of the particular institution.

"We continually receive requests from people who want to use our surveys," Wentz said. "They either heard us at a conference, stumbled upon our surveys' Web site or were referred to us through all of the consulting that UW-Stout does" in conjunction with the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award that the university won in 2001 or its involvement with the Academic Quality Improvement Program, known as AQIP.

Also, Wentz said, AQIP, an alternative accreditation organization that includes UW-Stout, requires the university to provide data from similar institutions, "but since our surveys are internally developed, no comparative data is available. This is not just an issue for us; it is also an issue for any other institution in AQIP that is using its own surveys."

Finally, Wentz said, "We kept going to conferences or reading journal articles about 'new' projects that we'd already been doing – and we wanted to offer those tools to others. This was especially true in the area of computing evaluations, our alumni follow-up survey and our exit interview survey."

Wentz said the research center uses many UW-Stout students to help conduct and report on research, which helps both the students and the center. The staff of the Applied Research Center also includes faculty members who have an interest in research.

"Because we have the opportunity to work with both graduate and undergraduate students," Wentz said, "we offer lower rates than you'd find at other centers that are not connected to an institution of higher education."

Other institutions benefit from the experience UW-Stout has in conducting research, she said. "For example, UW-Stout has been conducting alumni and employer surveys since the early 1990s," Wentz said. "We implemented a laptop program for undergraduates in 2002, and have been implementing and revising evaluation instruments since that time."

Wentz said the results of the survey are delivered in clear, concise summaries that are easy to read and interpret.

"Many educational institutions have applied research centers, but we did not find any that specialize in providing institutional research-related services to other educational institutions," she said. "Most of the

others either provide services internally exclusively, or they focus on providing services to entities outside of higher education.”

The cost of a survey depends on the project, she said. For administering a benchmarking survey, which UW-Stout already has, there is a set rate that was based on salaries and administrative costs. The cost for a custom survey request is worked out individually with the institution.

For more information, including contact information, go to the Applied Research Center Web site <<http://www.uwstout.edu/bpa/arc/>> or contact Meridith Wentz at 715-232-5312.