

Welcome to the Summer 2008 issue of our *Strategies* newsletter. Hope your summer is going well! Thank you for reading and as always, we welcome your feedback.

~Hezel Associates

Summer 2008:

[Electronic Tracking Data: Self-Reporting Vs. Objective Data Collection](#)

[Factors Driving Online Higher Education](#)

[HA Digest](#)

Electronic Tracking Data: Self-Reporting Vs. Objective Data Collection

By: *Leia Schmidt, MS, & Jessica Yusaitis*

If you told us about all of your work activities during the past hour, could you tell us accurately? Would you tell us accurately? We suspect you might put a particular sheen on your activities, either because you wanted to make yourself look good or because you just couldn't remember. (We all have those challenges.)

But in research, our job at Hezel Associates is to discover as precisely as possible the reality of perceptions and behaviors. So we have been analyzing the veracity of self-reports, particularly of teacher behaviors.

Traditionally, researchers choose from self-reported methods-collected through surveys, self-assessments, interviews, logs, focus groups and group interviews-and objective sources of data-gathered from observations and secondary research. Self-reporting from study participants is the sole means of collecting data on certain behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes, yet researchers are challenged by many difficulties of collecting self-reported data. Hezel Associates has gained ground in validating study participant behaviors with the help of technology through electronic tracking.

Researchers bridge the divide between self-reporting and objective data collection with electronic tracking-a method which uses technology to provide an objective log of study participant actions. We're not saying that self-reports are not objective data, just that they are individually subjective data points that together form an aggregate picture of what people say about themselves.

Hezel Associates has seized the opportunity provided by our clients' focus on education technology to mine resources for previously unavailable data. This new data is more rigorous, provides a means for triangulation of traditional data, and assists in providing a more accurate and nuanced view of research results. In turn, electronic tracking helps alleviate some of the challenges to collecting accurate self-reported data. Electronic tracking also opens an entire new pool of information that proves useful for creating richer sets of data.

For an external evaluation of Video in Teaching and Learning (VITAL) online instructional resources conducted by Hezel Associates, VITAL's facilitators provided the evaluators with access to the electronic tracking of pilot teachers' use of the resources, with the study participants' consent. They used this data

to determine the frequency of each teacher's VITAL login, which and how often they downloaded resources (i.e. video clips, worksheets), and their activity as they navigated the website.

This data allowed Hezel Associates researchers to create three profile groups of VITAL study participants[1]:

- those who typically used VITAL less than once a month
- those who used VITAL once a month
- those who used VITAL greater than once a month.

These profiles, based on electronic tracking data, proved tremendously helpful in elucidating some interesting findings. Those participants who used VITAL greater than once a month typically had more teaching experience and/or had received in-person training. Those who typically used VITAL less than once a month tended to teach in small schools, urban districts, and/or were ELA teachers. All activity by users decreased over time--a troublesome finding--indicating a novelty effect associated with VITAL. This could be due to users accessing all resources of interest early on in the study.

An even more troublesome finding, with implications for the ethics of study design and instrument choice, was the surprising discrepancy between self-reported data and electronic tracking data. If researchers based their findings solely on self-reported data, they would have found that nearly ten percent of study participants used VITAL less than once per month - yet electronic tracking showed that 22 percent of study participants accessed VITAL less than once per month (a 12 percent difference). Additionally, nearly 90 percent of participating teachers indicated they downloaded at least one VITAL resource each month, whereas online tracking data clearly showed that about 32 percent of teachers averaged fewer than one resource download per month.

There are a number of potential rationales for these findings. For one, users of VITAL may have commitments and time constraints beyond their control that influence their ability to access VITAL as frequently as was required by the study, and possibly even as much as they might wish. Also, the Hawthorne Effect could have implications for these discrepancies, where performance increases when participants are aware of the researcher's presence - even if it is only knowledge that their actions will be tracked for future reference. With the necessary involvement of researchers in troubleshooting technology issues, communicating to keep participants engaged in a longitudinal study, and encouraging them to complete other study and data collection activities, researcher influence was unavoidable.

Therefore, participants' inclination to please the researcher and fulfill their study requirements may have conflicted with their previously mentioned constraints, possibly motivating participants to skew their reported level of performance.

Electronic data can be extremely helpful in creating a more accurate and nuanced representation of study participant activity. Hezel Associates' researchers found the use of technology important to their research on, and evaluation of, VITAL's online instructional resources. However, electronic tracking does come with some constraints: Fidelity measures are costly and time-consuming. Also, the client must work with the research team to make these data available. The data may not be in a useable format, which may require many man-hours to clean before it can be analyzed. The actual analysis may also take considerable time and resources due to the sheer quantity of data available.

Still, with the discrepancies highlighted between self-reported and electronic tracking data, the richer and more nuanced analysis and findings, and the increasing use of technology in research and evaluation, use of electronic tracking will certainly continue to increase---at Hezel Associates and elsewhere in the field.

[1] *The minimum expectation of VITAL use during the experiment was once each month

Factors Driving Online Higher Education

By: *Melissa Fleischmann*

As Americans continue to try to find creative ways to live within the lean economy, higher education institutions are faced with the central challenge of keeping opportunities affordable, attainable, and accessible to the masses. Although fuel costs of more than \$4.00 a gallon have drawn much of the widespread media attention, a multitude of other factors, including financial aid, competitive admissions processes, strategic enrollment, budget constraints on programs, and job availability, have driven college students to reconsider their approach, ability, and desire to pursue higher education.

Traditionally, distance learning has been seen as a delivery modality used to satisfy student needs for convenience and accessibility. Over the last decade, the online market has seen constant but incremental enrollment growth, varying from 10 to 25 percent annually. In the face of current challenges, however, some are lauding distance learning in higher education as a "magic bullet," [1] evidenced by astronomical enrollment growth nearing 80 percent in some areas, particularly in community colleges [2]. Recent Degree.com surveys indicate that skyrocketing costs are now the primary factor for considering online opportunities, illustrating a distinct shift away from simple convenience as the driving force [3]. Whether such a finding reflects a heuristic value of mid-2008 only remains to be seen. If the concern over gas prices remains a long term motivator for distance learning, then we should be able to track changes in online enrollments relative to gas prices. In addition, we would expect to see on-campus enrollments decline somewhat due to displacement.

Many institutions are also seeing transitions, even among traditional student populations, to online course attendance. Consortiums like Sloan-C expect the future to hold "a blended classroom - half online, half in class," according to director John Bourne [4]. Politicians have chimed in, with Presidential candidate John McCain (R) recently stating in a NAACP address his support for the push to online education through proposed funding of \$500 million to build "new virtual schools and to support the development of online courses," along with \$250 million "to support state programs expanding online education opportunities," [5].

While Americans feel the pinch in their wallets, educational institutions must respond if they are to continue to grow and take advantage of the exploding demand for distance learning. Truly, the online environment's growth has been amplified by the current state of the domestic marketplace [6]. Leaders in institutions of varying size have begun to examine their position and strategic plans to serve this segment of current and prospective students.

For more than 20 years, Hezel Associates has been a resource to administrators and policymakers faced with these types of critical challenges. Our long history and experience has shown us that there are several areas of consideration for any institution that has a desire or need to respond in the face of times like these. As you look to the future, a few tips can guide your process:

1. **Know thyself.** You must undertake a clear analysis of the internal context of your organization before you can efficiently consider the outside forces impacting your direction. Know your strengths and your weaknesses. Understand your resources, your mission, and how areas like distance learning will be a component of the "big picture."
2. **Get a realistic view of the outside world.** Simply surveying your competition isn't enough. Take the time and effort to get a credible review of the market and be sensitive to the constantly changing forces that exist. Good information is the key to good decision making and can help you quantify your opportunities and threats. Spend the time and effort to benchmark your activities with other leaders, thereby enabling you to understand where you stand in the broader context of the market [7].
3. **Keep it objective.** Certainly, most higher education institutions are full of talent and very prideful of their internal abilities. Be wary, however, of seeing the world through rose-colored glasses. Having a qualified external consultant assist your review and analysis can provide critical perspective. The funds you commit to this outside view can yield a return on investment that is far beyond the initial financial commitment.
4. **Keep an open mind.** Reaching today's students is not the same as yesteryear, and out-of-the-ordinary ideas can be successful.
5. **Strategically chart your course, adhere to your plan, and continually evaluate your progress.** A formal plan only works if it's implemented and managed by good people. Without

full organizational support, moving forward in the face of adversity can seem like a small army trying to fight a full scale war. Plans should be clear, objective, reasonable, and measurable, with impact across the institution of full consideration.

With all of this in mind, put some thought into where you really want to be -in one year, five years, ten years, and beyond. Who will your students be? What will they want to learn, and how will you teach them? The answers will continue to be uncertain, influenced by uncontrollable factors and fueled by a volatile economy.

- [1] "Rising Fuel Prices Prompt Students to Call for Greater Adoption of Lecture Capture." CNN Money. June 25, 2008.
- [2] Dillon, Sam. "High Cost of Driving Ignites Online Classes Boom." July 11, 2008.
- [3] "Online Degree Programs and Distance Learning Increasing with the Price of Gas." BusinessWire. June 19, 2008.
- [4] Kelsey, Nancy. "High gas prices fuel boom in online classes." Associated Press. July 9, 2008.
- [5] Aigner-Treworgy, Adam. "McCain Addresses NAACP." MSNBC. July 16, 2008.
- [6] Schroeder, Ray. "Students Fill Up Online Classes, Not Tanks." Online Learning Update. June 12, 2008.
- [7] www.iqat.org

HA Digest

Our People

July 28 marked the publication of the book, [*Power, Politics, and Higher Education in Southern Africa: International Regimes, Local Governments, and Educational Autonomy*](#), written by **Dr. José Cossa**, Research Analyst for Higher Education at Hezel Associates. The book focuses on perceptions of power dynamics in negotiations by Global International Regimes and Regional International Regimes. Visit www.cambriapress.com for more information. The book is available through Cambria Press online as well as through most fine book sellers.

Our Work

The Minnesota Department of Education

Hezel Associates has been selected by the Minnesota Department of Education to develop and implement an evaluation of the Mathematics and Science Teacher Academy (MSTA). This is a one-year contract focused on the improvement of mathematics and science instruction and learning.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln selected Hezel Associates to conduct market research and analysis for its Independent Study High School program--the first university-based independent study program of its type.

Our Ideas

Hezel Associates is weighing in on education's hot topics. Look for members of the Hezel team at these upcoming conferences.

[SHEEO Higher Education Policy Conference,formerly the Professional Development Conference](#)

August 12-15, San Diego, CA

Josh Mitchell and José Cossa will attend.

[North American Council for Online Learning \(NACOL\) Virtual School Symposium](#)

October 26-28, Phoenix, AZ

Versonya DuPont will attend.

Get the latest news on Hezel Associates. Visit www.hezel.com and check out our news and events page.