Public Records as a Source for Assessment Data

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present how program assessment data can be gathered from information available from public sources in the government. Public records are investigated as a source of assessment data. Particularly, this paper deals with records that are well suited for civil engineering technology, civil engineering, and related degree programs. These records include engineering licensing records of individuals, Requests For Proposals/Requests for Qualifications submissions from consulting firms provided to public agencies, government budgets, job titles & job descriptions for government jobs, educational backgrounds of employees working for government agencies, and election results and public appointments to boards, committees, and similar organizations. Records are available from state, county, and city sources. These records are independent of the assessment and as such could provide an assessment data source not biased by the assessment process. The records and the data availability varies from easily accessible information found on the Internet to papers and reports filed away in the back corner of small government offices. Such records and data should be used in concert with additional assessment information. Interpretation of public record assessment data is an ongoing process. Future work includes using the gathered information for program assessment and continuous improvement.

Introduction

A unique method of gathering assessment data occurred as two professors discussed the newspaper. Pay rates for job classifications of county government workers were printed on pages of the local newspaper. The names of some of these workers were mentioned as the various job classifications were viewed. These names were of graduates of the program. The paper was filed away with a remark that it is interesting and useful to know this information. This exact information is requested on both graduate and employer surveys sent for the department's assessment program. The response to these surveys is often less than desired and always dependent on the accuracy of the person completing the form. In the case of these government workers, no graduate or employer survey was on file. However, now the local newspaper had provided some of the information requested on these surveys and it was all based on public records. The idea of what other information could be obtained from public records was born and a process began to think of and search for other sources of assessment data that could be gleaned from public records.

Assessment

Assessment is common in many facets of academe. It is often now required to demonstrate how well objectives are met through continuous improvement plans. Various methods of assessment exist and multiple measures of assessment are often specifically obligatory, expected, or desired. TAC-ABET[1] Criterion 3 states that

> Each program must utilize multiple assessment measures in a process that provides documented results to demonstrate that the program objectives and outcomes are being met. Assessment measures typically consist of, but are not limited to, student portfolios, student performance in project work and activity-based learning; results of integrated curricular experiences; relevant nationally-normed examinations; results of surveys to assess graduate and employer satisfaction with employment, career development, career mobility, and job title; and preparation for continuing education.

Furthermore, assessment is a part of university requirements and is found in the Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne Strategic Plan[2]. The Department of Civil and Architectural Engineering Technology has an Assessment and Continuous Improvement Plan[3]. This plan has assessment and evaluation procedures that are based in student evaluations, meetings with Industrial Advisory Committees, accreditation visits by TAC-ABET, and by surveys of employers and graduates.

Public Records

By the implicit nature of the word, public records are sources of information that is available. The character of much work done by civil engineering and civil engineering technology students manifests itself in the public realm. Thus, documentation of this work exists that is public record. These records include engineering licensing records of individuals, Requests For Proposals/Requests for Qualifications submissions from consulting firms provided to public agencies, government budgets, job titles & job descriptions for government jobs, backgrounds of employees working for government agencies, and public appointments to boards, committees, and similar organizations as well as a few election results. These records exist at the state, county, and city levels of government. Information in government sources is available to the public as principle of law although to date all information asked for has been provided without question. There has been no need to cite a law or provide any rationale to obtain records. It is likely that records also exist at the federal level. However, that is not an aspect of this assessment data gathering effort or this paper.

Professional licensing as a source of assessment is common in many degree programs. Certainly that is the case in civil engineering and civil engineering technology. Questions pertaining to licensing often appear on graduate surveys and passing rates for the fundamentals of engineering exam are used as assessment measures. The survey relies on an actual response and the accuracy or honesty of the respondent. The passing rate relies on students taking the exam while a senior in the program or a response to a survey.

Professional licensing records is a matter of public record in Indiana and is available by the Internet[4]. A searchable database be can used to query individuals, geographic areas, and particular licenses among many other possibilities. An image of the web page that allows this search is shown as Figure 1. Many other states also publish a roster listing of licensed individuals.

Figure 1
Image of Indiana Online Licensing web page
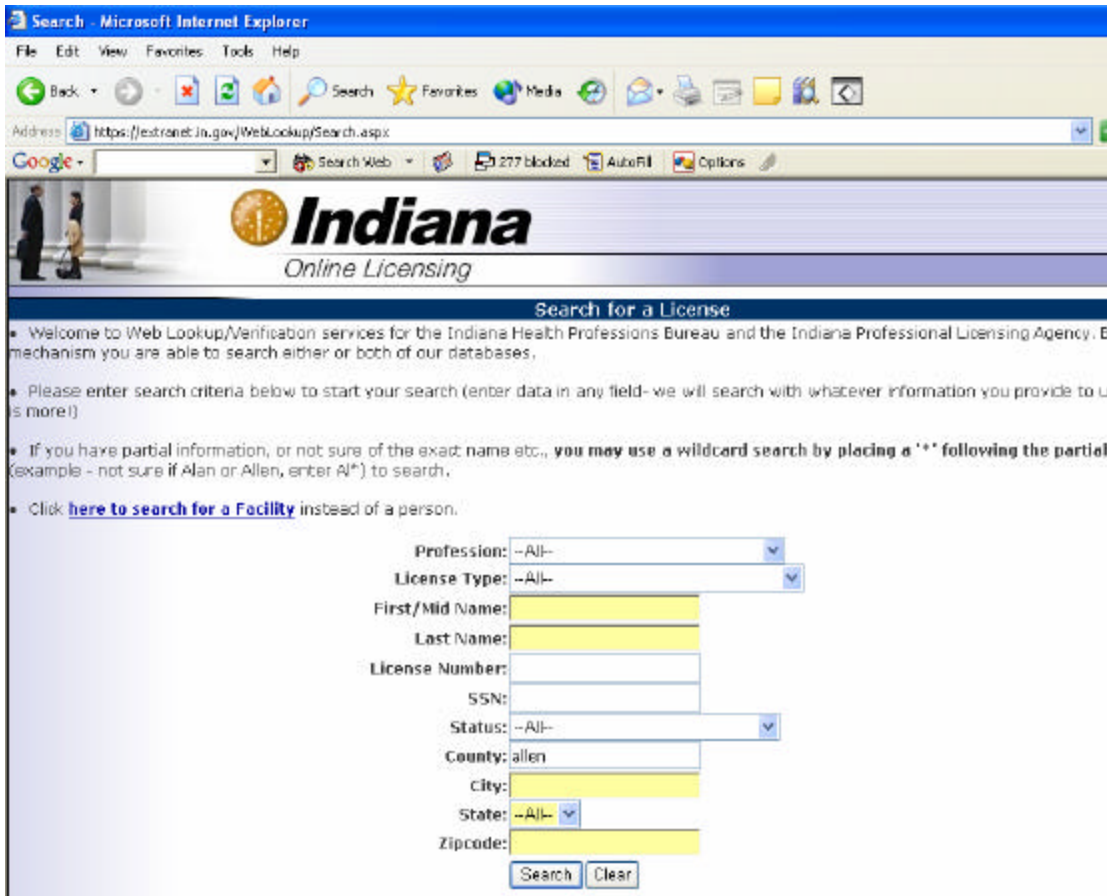
These records can be used to generate lists of licensed individuals and these lists can then be viewed to identify graduates or cross referenced with a database of graduates to find common names. An image of a database search is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Image License Search for Professional Engineer in Allen County Indiana

Government offices hire private companies to do work for them. It is common that these companies provide qualification statements in response to Requests For Proposals/Requests for Qualifications put out by the government offices seeking consultants for this work. Inquiries were made to the local city and county officials about such information and if it was public information. The answer was yes and an appointment was made to view recent submissions. These materials were searched for résumés that indicated the university and degree programs of interest. Notes were made of when these people graduated, the job title listed, and significant accomplishments cited in work history.

Government budgets record pay rates for government employees. This information is sometimes published in newspapers due to the law or is available on the Internet. The information is most certainly available upon request. Pay rates for positions held by graduates gathered from a public records source are a verifiable means to determine earning potential. This information is often not easily interpreted without a good understanding of the government budget and accounts because some jobs receive pay from various accounts.

Job titles and job descriptions for government jobs are usually posted when a job is vacant. This information is also available for all jobs that are filled with employees. Such information was viewed and notes were made of which titles and descriptions were appropriate for graduates of the degree programs of interest. Subsequent inquiries about who is employed at these positions and what their educational background is provides an information source of how many graduates fill which positions in various government jobs. Furthermore, inquiries about graduates who work in various government positions can reveal jobs that graduates fill that they may either be over or under educated for by nature of the degree granted by the program.

Collecting this data also allows the opportunity to document how some graduates continue education after leaving the program.

The names and backgrounds of persons appointed to government boards, committees, and similar organizations is often posted on the World Wide Web or available in these offices. Furthermore, the names of people running for public office is public information. In particular in this locality the County Surveyor is an elected position. Upon election, the education background of this county employee is public information.

Use of Data

The use of the data gathered is a future task in this project. The identification of such data and the gathering of the data is the current task. These records will allow assessment of graduates functioning in the work world after they have left the university. It is acknowledged that the use of the data is the more challenging aspect of the project.

The nature of the department and university as well as political geography lends itself to this project. The university has a mission to serve a limited geographic area of the immediate surrounding counties. The city and county where the university is located is the population center of this area. Thus, more information is available in a few offices for 1 city and 1 county as opposed to a university that serves a much larger constituency or has several large cities or population centers near it. Thus, it is recognized that such a project may not be applicable for some degree programs.

Conclusion

Public records exists that contain data useful for program assessment in civil engineering technology degree programs. Assessing how graduates function in the work world is typically done through surveys to both the graduates and their employers. However, various public records contain information that can be used to also assess how graduates are functioning in the work world. These records are independent of the assessment and as such could provide an assessment data source not biased by the assessment process of sending surveys to employers and graduates. Such records and data should be used in concert with additional assessment information. Interpretation of public record assessment data is an ongoing process. It is planned that use of the assessment data gathered through this project will be presented at future conferences.

Bibliographic Information

1   ABET, Inc. http://www.abet.org/.
2   Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne Strategic Plan,
    http://www.ipfw.edu/vcaa/plan/SP_plan.html
3   Assessment and Continuous Improvement Plan, Department of Civil and Architectural Engineering
    Technology, School of Engineering, Technology, and Computer Science, Indiana University Purdue
    University Fort Wayne, February 2004.
4   Indiana Professional Licensing Agency, http://www.in.gov/pla/

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