

PROGRAM DELIVERY: PERCEPTIONS AND SATISFACTION OF KEY CONSTITUENCIES

Susan J. Jenkins, Idaho State University
Janiel G. Nelson, Idaho State University

ABSTRACT

Economics is the study of decision making which attempts to balance scarce resources with unlimited wants and needs. This is a basic skill for functioning in society. According to a recent national survey, two-thirds of high school students and one-half of adults failed an economic literacy exam. The need for improving the economic education of our young people is apparent.

The mission of the Idaho State University Center for Economic Education (an affiliate of EconomicsAmerica, the National Council on Economic Education) is to improve the quality and expand the reach of economic education at all levels of public and private education, and the general public. To accomplish this goal, the Center provides services including teacher training, curriculum development, and classroom resources.

This study was designed to evaluate current delivery of Center services and resources. The perceptions and satisfaction levels of key constituencies were collected. These data will be used to align future programs with the needs of K-12 students, teachers, and administrators; EconomicsAmerica coordinators; and advisory board members from the business community.

INTRODUCTION

Fundamentally, economics is the study of decision making which attempts to balance scarce resources with unlimited wants and needs. This definition emphasizes two main points: (1) resources are scarce; and (2) human beings have an infinite number of needs and wants to which those resources must be allocated. Understanding and application of this process is a basic skill for functioning in society as a consumer, producer, saver, investor, and citizen. This body of

knowledge is critical not only for decision making in personal and professional settings, but as individuals function in the global economy as well.

Louis Harris & Associates, Inc. conducted one of the most recent research studies designed to describe the status of economic literacy in our country. In this project, 1,010 adults and 1,085 high school students were given a test on basic economic principles. "On average, the adults got a grade of 57%. Among high school students, the average grade was 48%" (Brenner, 1999, p. 5). "Two out of three (64%) adults and half (48%) of all students feel that it is very important for the people of the United States to have a good understanding of economics"... yet, "Two in five (40%) American high School students have not been taught economics in school" (Brenner, 1999, p. 5).

The goal of economic education is more responsible and effective citizenship through helping students acquire the ability to use economics as independent decision makers confronting problems, personal and social, rather than merely helping them gain knowledge of the facts, concepts and assumptions that comprise part of the discipline. It empowers students to understand their world, make-reasoned decisions, and act appropriately on personal and social issues of significance. (Miller, 191, p. 31)

The National Council on Economic Education (NCEE), EconomicsAmerica, is a major player in the economic education movement. The mission of the NCEE is "to help our nation's schoolchildren develop economic ways of thinking and problem solving to prepare them to participate in and to lead the global economy they will inherit (R. F. Duvall, personal communication, January 12, 2000). This mission is reaffirmed in the program and delivery methods utilized by the NCEE: "(1) set National Standards for Economic Education; (2) develop curriculum K-12; (3) publish teacher materials; (4) offer teachers professional training; and (5) conduct evaluation and research" (R. F. Duvall, personal communication, January 12, 2000). This is the only organization dedicated to economic education that utilizes all five methods.

Centers for Economic Education are the delivery arm of the NCEE. They are typically located on college and university campuses and are dedicated to teacher education, curriculum development, and resource distribution in economic education. These economic programs are designed around a set of twenty-one economic concepts.

“Economic concepts are the bases of economic understanding and reasoned decision making. [The] concepts provide the analytical tools needed to understand and make reasoned decisions about economic issues – both personal and social” (Sanders, Bach, Calderwood, Hansen, Stein, 1993, p. 13). In turn, these “principles of economics bear directly on the ordinary business of life . . . by the time [students] have finished twelfth grade...they should understand basic economic concepts and be able to reason logically about key economic issues that affect their lives as workers, consumers, and citizens, so they can avoid errors that are common among persons who do not understand economics” (National Council on Economic Education, 1997, p. xi).

“After economics was included in the Goals 2000 Education America Act in 1994, the NCEE assembled a coalition of organizations to write voluntary content standards to guide economic instruction in American schools” (National Council on Economic Education, 1997, p. xi).

These standards outline essential principles of economics, why it is important to understand them, and then provide benchmarks of what a student should be able to do with that knowledge.

BACKGROUND

The Center for Economic Education at Idaho State University is affiliated with the NCEE and serves schools and communities in southeast Idaho. Key constituencies include superintendents and principals in 33 member school districts. Within each building (elementary, middle and high school) in each school district, an individual has been identified as an EconomicsAmerica coordinator. This position involves serving as a liaison between the professionals (administrators and teachers) in that building and the ISU Center. The Center also makes use of an advisory board which is made up of volunteers from business, industry, and education. These members offer insight and guidance for planning and delivering economic education programs.

In order to get a school involved in economic education, key constituencies must be informed and actively involved in program planning. Ultimately, “creating curriculum change requires centers to offer programs for teachers that improve their

understanding of economics and provide them with quality instructional materials (Dempsey, Meszaros, Suiter, M., 1999, p. 2). "Planning defines what has to be accomplished to deliver useful and intended results (Kaufman, Herman, Watters, 1996, p. 75) and a key component of the planning process is to conduct a needs assessment. "Needs assessment will identify and document problems, identify what should and shouldn't be changed, and recognize opportunities" (Kaufman, Herman, Watters, 1996, p.79).

Minimal research has been conducted at the ISU Center for Economic Education in regard to the needs of the target clientele who are the recipients of economic education services. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess key constituencies in order to determine: (1) perceptions of economic education; and (2) levels of satisfaction with specific services offered by the ISU Center for Economic Education.

METHOD

Population

The service area of the ISU Center includes Administrative Regions 5 and 6 in southeast Idaho. Thirty-three schools districts are members of the EconomicsAmerica program. Key constituencies of the ISU Center include K-12 superintendents, principals, EconomicsAmerica coordinators, and advisory board members. These constituencies are the target clientele of Center services.

Sampling Technique

Permission to collect data was received from the Human Subjects Committee at Idaho State University. A list of superintendents and principals was obtained from the Idaho Educational Directory, 1998-1999. The EconomicsAmerica coordinators and advisory board listing was generated from a database maintained in the Center. The total number of desired respondents was 430.

Procedure

The structure of the survey instrument included three sections: (1) Demographics; (2) Perceptions of Economic Education; and (3) Satisfaction with Center Services. Respondents were asked to rate (on a Likert scale from 1 to 5)

perceptions of economic education (“not sure” to “strongly agree”) and level of satisfaction with Center programs (“not sure” to “very satisfied”).

Each of the key constituencies received a mailed survey with a cover letter, explaining the purpose of the research, and a postage-paid return envelope. The respondents’ names were not required on the survey, therefore, assuring them of anonymity and confidentiality.

There were 126 constituencies who completed the survey. Response rate was 29%. Data analysis was performed using SPSS 9.0 for Windows.

RESULTS

Demographics

Key constituency data were grouped and summarized as illustrated in Table 1. Fifty-six percent of the respondents (63) were building principals; 22.3% (25) were EconomicsAmerica coordinators; 17.9% (20) were superintendents; and 1.8 (2) were advisory board members.

Table 1		
Key Constituencies		
Position Title	Frequency	Valid Percent
Principal	63	56.3
EconomicsAmerica Coordinator	25	22.3
Superintendent	20	17.9
Advisory Board	2	1.8
Other	2	1.8
Total	112	100.0
Missing Data	14	
n=126		

Because of the increasing availability of technology-based instruction in the delivery of economic education programs, key constituencies were asked to report the number of technology tools available in their district. The tools counted were: PC format, Mac format, email, Internet and Distance Learning Site. Table 2

summarizes these data as reported by survey respondents. Forth-four percent (53) had 3 technology tools available in their district; 30% (36) had four; 12.5 (15) had only one; 11.7% (14) had all five technology tools; and 1.7% (2) had only two technology tools for delivery of economic education programs.

Table 2 Technology Tools Available in District		
Number	Frequency	Valid Percent
Three Resources	53	44.2
Four Resources	36	30.0
One Resource	15	12.5
Five Resources	14	11.7
Two Resources	2	1.7
Total	120	100.0
Missing Data	6	
n=126		

Perceptions of Economic Education

Key constituencies were asked to rate their perceptions of five statements concerning economic education (Likert scale from 1 “not sure” to 5 “strongly agree”). The statement with which respondents most agreed was “all high school students should be required to take an economics course” (mean score = 4.46; sd = .66). The statement respondents least agreed with was “all teachers (K-12) should be required to incorporate economics into their curriculum” (mean score = 3.56; sd = 1.11). See Table 3 for a complete summary of all five statements.

Table 3 Perceptions of Economic Education					
Descriptive	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.

High School students required to take economics	123	1	5	4.46	.66
Economics is a basic skill for all students	123	1	5	4.30	.78
Balance between theoretical and practical economics	124	1	5	4.15	.78
Teachers required to have selected training	124	1	5	3.92	.83
All teachers (K-12) required to teach economics	124	1	5	3.56	1.11

Satisfaction with Center Services

Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with specific services currently provided by the ISU Center. A Likert scale from 1 (“not sure”) to 5 (“very satisfied”) was utilized. The Center service with which key constituencies were most satisfied was the “monthly newsletter” (mean = 3.18; sd = 1.39). The service with which respondents were least satisfied was “coordinator training” (mean = 2.33; sd = 1.54). Table 4 summarizes constituency satisfaction with 7 major services provided by the Center (means and standard deviations are provided).

Table 4 Satisfaction with Center Services					
Descriptive	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Monthly Newsletter	118	1	5	3.18	1.39
Teacher Workshops/Training	119	1	5	2.66	1.54
Curriculum Resource Library	116	1	5	2.59	1.55
Standards for Teaching Economics	115	1	5	2.53	1.49
Site/Building Visits	115	1	5	2.37	1.47
Coordinator Training	116	1	5	2.33	1.54

The means for “level of satisfaction” with specific Center services were recalculated after eliminating the Likert scale anchor 1 = “not sure”. Careful review

of the completed individual surveys revealed that “not sure” was an indicator of “non-users” of Center services. A summary of these data are illustrated in Table 5.

These new means for "level of satisfaction" with specific Center services were: "curriculum resource library" (mean = 3.98; sd = .59); "monthly newsletter" (mean = 3.95; sd = .55); "coordinator training" (mean = 3.91; sd = .74); "teacher workshops/ training" (mean = 3.83; sd = .83); "standards for teaching economics" (mean = 3.79; sd = .72; and "site/building visits" (mean = 3.74; sd = .72). This is a more accurate reflection of the levels of satisfaction of key constituencies as it includes only those respondents who are knowledgeable of, and utilize, the services provided.

Table 5 Satisfaction with Center Services					
Descriptive	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Curriculum Resource Library	62	2	5	3.98	.59
Monthly Newsletter	86	2	5	3.95	.55
Coordinator Training	53	2	5	3.91	.74
Teacher Workshops/Training	70	2	5	3.83	.83
Standards for Teaching Economics	63	2	5	3.79	.72
Site/Building Visits	57	2	5	3.74	.72
Valid N = 31					

DISCUSSION

Demographics

Demographic data indicate that, of those key constituencies who completed the survey, only 11.7% had all five of the basic technology tools assessed by the survey; 12.5% had only one. These data concerning availability of basic technology tools have major implications for the planning and delivery of economic education programs.

Perceptions of Economic Education

It was evident that survey respondents agreed “economics should be a required course for high school students” ($\underline{M}=4.46$). Key constituencies also agreed “economics is a basic skill/competency necessary for all students” and that there should be an instructional “balance between ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ economic education”. Most respondents agreed ($\underline{M}=3.92$) that “teachers should be required to have selected training/coursework in order to teach economic education curriculum”. The statement with which there was least agreement was “all teachers (K-12) should be required to incorporate economics into their curriculum” ($\underline{M}=3.56$). These data provide insights into the current perceptions of economic education administrators, EconomicsAmerica coordinators, and advisory board members. These perceptions have strong implications for the focus of future program delivery in economic education.

Evaluation of Specific Services

The following is a listing of “level of satisfaction” with specific Center services in ranked order from “very satisfied to unsatisfied”: curriculum resource library, monthly newsletter, coordinator training, teacher workshops/training, standards for teaching economics, and site/building visits. These data accurately reflect the satisfaction of current users of these services. The challenge remaining is to educate and introduce non-users (those who reported “not sure”) to Center services and resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This baseline study was designed as a formal needs assessment to document current perceptions of economic education and levels of satisfaction with Center services from key constituencies. Analysis of the data has resulted in three recommendations: (1) the Center must take a more active role in generating support for technology-based instruction in economic education; (2) although constituencies agree that economics is a basic skill necessary for all students, the Center must continue to increase awareness that economic education should take place across the curriculum and throughout all grade levels (K-12); and (3) the users of current Center services are “satisfied” with these programs and resources; however, a concerted effort must be made to ensure that all districts are made aware of, and have the opportunity to utilize, these services. The Center must target “non-users” in an attempt to expand its user-base.

REPLICATION OF THE STUDY

This research study should be repeated regularly. Data could be collected on an annual basis at a regular point in the academic year (i.e. early fall or late spring). In this way, progress toward increased satisfaction and commitment to economic education could more accurately be measured across time. This survey could also be utilized throughout the state, by the Idaho Council on Economic Education, to generate a more accurate picture of statewide needs.

RELATED RESEARCH

To provide further insights and more targeted data with which to improve program delivery, detailed questions on each of the unique Center services could be generated. For example, key constituencies could be surveyed concerning their “specific needs in a monthly newsletter.” Or, “needs and desires in teacher training” could be assessed. These data could begin to help answer more precise questions concerning the design of each individual component of Center delivery.

As K-12 teachers are the ultimate end-users of economic education services, they should also be surveyed regarding their perceptions and levels of satisfaction. When the classroom door closes, the quality of a program meets the acid test. As economic educators, the keys to influencing the classroom and student knowledge involve teachers with content expertise and high-quality classroom materials. Ultimately, teachers are the constituency who must be committed to economic education and satisfied with economic education programs and services.

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ECONOMICS ARTICLES