



PROJECT MUSE®

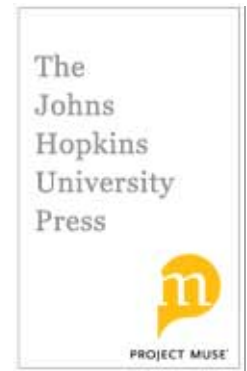
Searching for Campus Trends: Ambiguities in the Study of
Higher Education

Elaine El-Khawas

The Review of Higher Education, Volume 19, Number 1, Fall 1995, pp. 111-120
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1995.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/644606/summary>

Searching for Campus Trends: Ambiguities in the Study of Higher Education

Elaine El-Khawas

In one way or another, most research on American higher education involves a search for enduring campus practices or for evidence of changes in those practices. Over the past decade an annual survey of campus policies and practices, the American Council on Education's *Campus Trends* survey, has provided concrete experience with the difficulties in searching for general practices. This essay describes some of that experience, stressing the ambiguities of research inquiry even when researchers exercise substantial care in all phases of the study.

LEARNING FROM THE SURVEY

The *Campus Trends* survey was first conducted in 1984 with seed-money from the Lilly Endowment. Its initial goals were:

- to provide reliable information on the policies and practices of American higher education
- to focus on policy-relevant issues
- to assemble this information for all types of institutions
- to provide timely updates on changes in policy and practice.

Elaine El-Khawas, vice president for policy analysis and research at the American Council on Education, served as president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education for 1993–94. This paper was delivered as her presidential address, at the ASHE annual meeting, 11 November 1994 in Tucson, Arizona.

The survey was relatively straightforward the first year and, as planned, was repeated each following year. By now, eleven consecutive yearly surveys have been conducted, and planning is underway for *Campus Trends* 1995. The survey is entirely successful by traditional standards of social science research. It has a very good sample design, quite reasonable sampling fractions, and a consistently high response rate. The reliability of the survey is well established. Often, a figure obtained in the *Campus Trends* survey is later found to be right on target. When the 1991 study was being designed, for example, the controversy over the legality of minority-exclusive scholarships was heating up. The *Campus Trends* survey reported that most of the institutions that offered such scholarships gave very few awards each year. Later, more detailed surveys established a similar point.

As an example of applied research, *Campus Trends* is also successful: it receives good media coverage each year and is widely cited; it gets the attention of a key audience—senior college administrators—and it has achieved a considerable degree of name recognition.

As successive surveys were conducted, the unusual nature of the project became evident. In some ways it was a new survey each year, introducing new topics or adding different questions. Yet conducting an annual study that had the same purposes, that was focused on the same general topics, and that had many elements repeated verbatim, also produced an unusual degree of continuity.

As a result, the *Campus Trends* study has offered a special perspective on the research process. Each year's decisions are enriched by knowing how respondents earlier dealt with a certain question. We made better decisions because we had already spent time reflecting on what we had learned in prior surveys.

Thus, as a new survey began, we had the research advantage of considering earlier surveys to be pre-tests or pilot studies, and, simultaneously, viewing each new survey as replicating the prior year's *Campus Trends* survey. Alexander Astin's yearly surveys of college freshmen are the main precedent in higher education for the conduct of a continuing yearly survey (Astin, Korn, and Riggs 1993). The Carnegie Foundation's occasional surveys of college faculty offer a similar precedent (Boyer 1989), and Bob Pace's Student Questionnaire offers another precedent for asking questions again after the results of the first questioning have been thoroughly analyzed.

The continuing nature of the *Campus Trends* study offers a methodological advantage. Repeating certain elements of inquiry greatly raises one's sensitivity to the potential distortions that can be introduced by small changes or by not examining implicit assumptions in what one is designing.

This essay relates several lessons from my ten years' experience with the *Campus Trends* study, paying special attention to three aspects of research technique: choosing the issues to ask about, wording the questions, and interpreting the findings. Throughout, the central message is that the extent of interpretive discretion available to the researcher is much greater than generally acknowledged.

One caveat: these examples are based on survey research but are not meant to take sides on the relative virtues of quantitative versus qualitative research. These comments involve principles for good research inquiry and should apply to any method for studying higher education, whether by survey, by interviews, by observational techniques, or by use of documentary evidence.

CHOOSING THE ISSUES

There are a number of pitfalls in choosing what issues to cover. It's possible, for example, to be too policy relevant. In early 1991, war broke out in the Persian Gulf. Quickly, we developed questions to tap campus reaction and to gauge what impact the war was having on students, courses, or campus climate. Yet the fighting ended so quickly that these questions became obsolete. The fact that many respondents still completed this section of the survey offers a sobering lesson for research inquiry; it supports the fear that respondents are likely to offer the "expected" answers, to be swayed by the mere act of raising questions.

It is also possible to ask a question too soon. In 1991, as public institutions around the United States were suffering from abrupt budget cuts, we introduced questions about the impact of those budget cuts. In retrospect, it seems obvious that the correct answer at the time was "who knows?" or "it's too soon to say." Campuses were just coping in whatever way they could. Thinking about impact had to wait.

A related problem arises in trying to ask a question that is policy relevant but for which there is no common practice. Many policy-makers would like to know how much undergraduate teaching is done by part-time faculty. Yet data are not consistently collected in that form. It would be useful, at least, to know how many part-time instructors there are, in comparison to full-time instructors; but again, data are incomplete and inconsistent.

When choosing issues, it is also important that any study be very well grounded if it is to make a contribution. Good research must have a substantial knowledge base, including both a strong familiarity with the culture and ongoing practice of higher education, and also with relevant theoretical frameworks.

We saw the importance of knowing the operating culture of American higher education in some of the earliest surveys. The early 1980s were a time in which curriculum reform was quite in vogue. *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983; during the next few years, a number of other high-profile reports were issued: NIE's *Involvement in Learning*, AAC's report, *Integrity in the Classroom*, and NEH's report, *To Reclaim a Legacy*, were among them. (National Commission 1983; National Institute 1984; Association of American Colleges 1985; Bennett 1984).

Campus Trends 1985 tried to monitor campus reactions to these reports. We asked respondents whether their institutions were taking steps to change their curriculum as a result of these reports. Most said "yes." In each of the next few years, we asked these questions again. Every year, most said "yes, we're changing the curriculum." Slowly, it became evident that, in one way or another, most campuses are engaging in some form of curriculum change every year. It's part of the culture. However, the changes that can be reported in any single year may not amount to a fundamental change in the curriculum.

Knowing the culture also requires recognizing how the operational realities can vary substantially on different campuses. As an example, a recent survey tried to learn what campuses were doing to improve the status of women students. Several advisors developed questions, including one about whether an institution had established a commission on the status of women. Later it became obvious that commissions appear most often in large university settings and much less often at small institutions. The same level of interest or commitment may exist but is likely to find less formalized expression on smaller campuses. The questions we were asking did not capture the broader point that was really the basis for the inquiry.

A broad conceptual or theoretical framework is also necessary, especially when embarking on any substantial, continuing research effort. To help inform the interpretation of study findings on the *Campus Trends* project, we needed a very broad conceptual framework. The project didn't just study faculty, or curriculum, or finances. It was trying to describe and interpret events affecting all of American higher education. We needed concepts that related to the most general, or system-level, understanding of higher education. Literature with a global or cross-national perspective proved invaluable.

Two examples have been strikingly helpful. One is Martin Trow's (1973) seminal essay on the effects on higher education of serving a large percentage of high-school graduates, what he termed "mass higher education." This essay made the fundamental point (among many others) that high participation rates unrelentingly lead to reduced public spending on

a per-student basis; this point has been ignored in most policy debate in the United States, but it underscores the important reality that current funding pressures will continue and deserve continued monitoring.

As another example, Burton Clark (1983) captured an important insight when he discussed the market orientation that is a dominant organizing theme in American higher education. Some of the operating realities brought about by a market orientation are quite apparent—advertising and promotional brochures, fund-raising, and such—but many of the other manifestations of a market orientation are not so apparent. Consider the research implications of the fact that a significant effect of a market orientation is the tendency for senior administrators to present their institutions in a favorable light. Thus, survey questions seeking judgements or opinions from a senior administrator are likely to receive an optimistic answer.

Clark has also stressed that a market-based higher education system creates enormous pressures for “academic drift,” i.e., efforts by institutions of all types to modify their operations in the direction of more highly valued characteristics. One consequence for researchers is that the development of realistic survey questions often requires making certain assumptions about the overlap among institutions that might not otherwise seem necessary.

WORDING THE QUESTIONS

There are also murky waters in considering the potential distortions that can arise from small changes in wording. This may seem obvious, but most studies are conducted only once, so the researcher receives limited feedback on distortions. She or he can speculate about possible biases due to wording choices, order of questions, and the like, and can be entirely responsible by conducting pretests. Still, the main unstated premise of most studies is that the respondents will understand the questions without ambiguity.

In contrast, the *Campus Trends* survey regularly confronted evidence of the varying meanings that can be given to a word, even a seemingly technical term. An unusual feature of the *Campus Trends* project is that many respondents are themselves well-trained researchers; some respondents have even served on the study's advisory committee. With such an audience, one must develop a third ear, an exquisite ability to hear nuance and unstated modifiers.

One requirement, relevant to most research, is to be sensitive to changes in wording across institutions, across geographic regions, and over time. Consider the problems in asking respondents about nontraditional

students or, even, adult learners. Consider the ambiguities of asking useful questions about tenure or tenure quotas when campuses differ in their policies or when, at some institutions, a number of positions are not on a tenure track. Consider the wide differences that probably exist among colleges and universities in how the term "regular faculty" is defined.

Often, too, implicit assumptions are imbedded in the choice of verb form. For example, with recent budget cuts affecting colleges and universities, much is revealed (or obscured) by the choice of an active or passive verb form. Did the state cut budgets? Did the university administration cut budgets? Or did cuts just happen, as implied by the phrase, "budgets were cut"?

A different failing is to assume an unstated subpoint. For example, one question asked whether a university had "any new hiring" in the last year. What prompted the new hiring—replacement needs? new positions? Do we mean "hiring only for regular positions"? Far too often, an assumption is made one way or another on these subpoints. In 1984, the first year of the *Campus Trends* study, the survey asked about new faculty hiring without distinguishing between tenure-track and other appointments. We didn't make that mistake again!

Another implicit bias that can be built into research inquiry is to assume that different factors constitute independent variables. Whether in interviews or in conducting surveys, research models normally list key factors as if they are separate phenomena. That may not be the essential reality for respondents, but the research approach can be unduly reductionist, obscuring an important point. A recent example comes from the 1994 survey, which asked about interventions important to degree attainment for underprepared students. Fortunately, the responses were open-ended and we read them carefully; it became clear that respondents were consistently linking two factors—academic support and personal support. While the vocabulary differed, respondents consistently used linking words and joined both concepts in a single sentence or phrase. If we had used a checklist, the respondents would have probably checked both and we would have reported the results as separate variables, not in the linked imagery that conveyed an important message on how to assist underprepared students.

INTERPRETING FINDINGS

Ambiguity can also enter a third stage of research inquiry: interpreting study findings. My general theme is this: Whatever the method, accurate interpretation is much more elusive than researchers often realize.

For the *Campus Trends* study, the most visible problem of interpretation arises from the study's title: just when can you call something a "trend"? Our general plan was to repeat certain parts of the study year after year, often repeating certain questions verbatim. Thus, we were doing more than simply conducting several consecutive surveys; we were also trying to establish the pattern of change, to see what the trend lines were, and typically to map areas where very little baseline information existed. Interestingly, administrators most often ask about trends, more than the baseline facts.

This aspect of the project differed substantially from the one-time surveys that are the basis for much research inquiry. Rather early, special methodological questions became evident: What, exactly, is a trend? It is not the responses to a single year's survey, or to two years of information, but what about three years? Must one wait four or five years? When is it safe to interpret a trend?

Nor does the potential for ambiguity end here. When can a trend be said to have changed direction? Once a pattern is established, what can be said when the next year's survey shows a change? Is it some aberration due to a flaw in survey procedures? Or is a genuine change taking place among colleges and universities? Are we ever able to recognize a short-term trend or a policy reversal as it is happening?

For example, consider the difficulties of interpreting enrollment trends during the last decade. Looking back, it is clear that the decade was one of rising enrollments. Total enrollment in 1984 was 12.2 million students; by 1988, it was 13.1 million, and by 1991 there were 14.4 million students (National Center 1993, 174). However, in the mid-1980s, the interpretive problem for the *Campus Trends* study was to understand why enrollment gains were continuing, despite a demographic decline in high-school graduates. Project data showed enrollment increases. Was it somehow untrustworthy? Or was one year's data simply recording the "last good year" of enrollment gain? The record of steady gains during the late 1980s is now familiar, but it was not so obvious a pattern when survey data were being collected each year.

The published reports reflect the uncertainty. A heading in the 1987 report reads: "Some enrollment gains continue but there are important decreases." A sentence in the 1988 report reads: "The overall enrollment picture is stronger than in previous years and . . . more positive than most analysts have predicted." By 1989, the report writing is strictly factual, noting that 71 percent did this, while 10 percent did that; it carries no interpretive comments at all, even while it shows a trendline from 1986 to 1989 of increased enrollment.

This year-by-year experience with enrollment data provides perspective on the general hazards of interpreting information. How much of a

trendline should we seek before declaring a trend or a change? How often are results from a one-time study compared to results from an earlier time period, with the writer then declaring a change? The task of identifying trends requires more caution than is usually recognized.

Similarly, interpreting data results is another difficult task, even though it is often done in haste. Perhaps there should be more specific rules for keeping within proper bounds, i.e., for evaluating the strength or weakness of evidence. Type I and Type II errors may be needed for interpretation, and perhaps Types III through VI as well. A formal procedure for "piloting" or testing interpretations could also be beneficial.

For the *Campus Trends* project, the task of accurate interpretation is assisted by a two-day discussion of each year's initial findings. The advisory committee for the project receives a full draft manuscript with all the data, then meets to discuss the initial interpretations, testing them against the members' experience. The "findings" are generally pulled apart, substantially revised, and reassembled. The result is a more accurate interpretation with less ambiguity and fewer instances where seemingly neutral language carries meanings that are not supported by the data. This process is lively, grounded in a range of real-world experience. It offers a strong corrective for the limits of one person's thinking. This approach—a meeting to discuss initial interpretations—might be more widely used. Further thinking is also needed about how to handle the general problem of accurate interpretation.

CONCLUSION

More experience with research, therefore, has led me to a stronger appreciation of the ambiguities inherent in research inquiry and the possibilities for misinterpretation that remain even when good research procedures are followed. I have also gained perspective on a question that everyone must encounter in his or her professional life—whether it is possible to really understand what we are getting into when we begin a new project.

Two points emerge from my experience with the *Campus Trends* project: First, we generally do *not* know the full dimensions of what we are doing when we begin a new project. A second point, however, is that there is a way to predict what will unfold. The key is to understand ourselves. The more I understand myself, the more I can predict the choices I will make in shaping any project, now or in the future. From the perspective of having completed eleven surveys of *Campus Trends*, I am clear that this project reveals a lot about me and my life history.

What's notable, for example, is that the project takes a very broad sweep. It's not a study of financial health, nor of curriculum change, nor of faculty hiring. It's all of these, and more; it has a wide scope, quite against the grain of most research studies. It might not be surprising to know, then, that almost all of my academic training has reflected a similarly broad scope: as an undergraduate, I was part of a comprehensive two-year approach to general education; at the master's level, I chose an interdisciplinary program of urban studies; at all levels, it was sociology—the broadest social science discipline—that always won my loyalties.

The project also is integrative, emphasizing trends affecting all of higher education, public and private, large and small. It stubbornly refuses to choose sides or to take narrow slices of a question, even though I've regularly received advice to the contrary. But I wanted to surmount the tendency to be sector-specific; it seemed too parochial and missed the ways that external events affected all segments of higher education. So, it may not be surprising to know that I am a middle child, prone to look both ways, to avoid divisive actions, and to try to surmount differences.

Similarly, my interest in a wide range of trends was undoubtedly shaped by the fact that my father, although he didn't complete high school, was enormously curious about the world around him. My readiness to take on sizable projects is influenced by the fact that my mother, although she didn't have a career, was energetic, organized, and constantly involved in demanding projects.

In some ways I look back and realize that I couldn't help but create the *Campus Trends* study. I suspect that this general point holds true for others as well. The nature of research inquiry and of the scholarly professions is to have tremendous discretion to define projects and interests; as a result, it is likely that the work we choose reflects deeply held values and predilections. As members of a scholarly association, we should recognize the different perspectives we bring to our work and celebrate the different contributions that together create the study of higher education.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Association of American Colleges. *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community*. Washington, D.C.: Author, 1985.
- Astin, Alexander W., William S. Korn, and Elyn R. Riggs. *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1993*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Cooperative Institutional Research Program, American Council on Education, 1993.
- Bennett, William J. *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984.

- Boyer, Ernest L. *The Condition of the Professoriate: Attitudes and Trends, 1989*. Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1989.
- Clark, Burton R. *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983.
- El-Khawas, Elaine. *Campus Trends, 1994*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1994.
- National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1993.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983.
- National Institute of Education. *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1984.
- Trow, Martin. "Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education." Special Report. San Francisco: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973.