

Executive Summary



Project Background and Overview

Huron Consulting Group worked with Southwest Tennessee Community College on a performance optimization project in Fall 2014 resulting in a number of recommendations related to improving service for students and for workforce and education partners in the Memphis community.

To further inform decision-making about suggested recommendations, Huron conducted the following primary audience research in Summer – Fall 2015.

- A survey with staff and faculty (including adjunct faculty) to assess:
 - Satisfaction and engagement with Southwest
 - Perceptions of Southwest's multidimensional mission and how well it is being fulfilled
 - Opportunities for improvement
- A community partner interview study conducted through 18 telephone interviews with high school counselors, workforce partners, and Foundation Board members to understand:
 - Commonly held perceptions of Southwest relative to its value for students, partners, and the Memphis community at large
 - How Southwest is evaluated relative to other colleges and universities on reputation and impact, responsiveness and other partnership behaviors
 - Quality and relevance of offerings

Key Findings: Faculty and Staff Survey

- While a majority of faculty and staff are proud to work at Southwest, fewer believe that the institution is effectively fulfilling its mission today.
- Faculty and staff universally say they understand their role in the Southwest mission, but less than half feel they have say in crucial decisions in their workplace.
- Faculty and staff give Southwest credit for offering programs that meet workforce needs and for its strong faculty.
- Effective enrollment, advising and financial aid services for students were identified as central to the Southwest mission but evaluated as weak areas of performance.
- Faculty and staff see an opportunity for the new leadership to seek more input, offer more transparency, and better communicate changes.
- Faculty and staff also see opportunities to strengthen the sense of Southwest's identity, both internally and externally, with greater visibility in the community and better student service.

Key Findings: Community Partner Interview Study

- Southwest is viewed by community partners as playing an essential higher education role in Memphis, and is acknowledged for its committed faculty, its academic focus and programs, and its convenience and affordability. Respondents believe that the heightened emphasis on community college education in Tennessee positions Southwest for growing success providing the College meets performance expectations.
- Workforce partners recommend that Southwest articulate a clearer strategy for how the College will help meet workforce needs, and improve its partnering behaviors when it comes to taking initiative, developing understanding of needs, and following through on potential projects.
- School counselors identified challenges in the admissions processes at Southwest, and urged the College to commit to a fuller advising and student support system.

Key Findings: Community Partner Interview Study, cont.

- Community partners recommend that Southwest enhance its institutional marketing by more assertively communicating its successful outcomes and value proposition, and by promoting its full range of programs.
- Southwest is positioned among highly ambitious competitor institutions in the Memphis market, ones that may be more effectively communicating relevance and value. Respondents advise the College to take steps to address this competitive challenge.

Comparative Findings: Internal and External Stakeholders

- Internal stakeholders and external community partners share a conviction about the importance of Southwest's mission and potential for impact in serving Memphis-area students and partners.
 - There is internal and external alignment about the need for the College to better promote its successes and distinctive role.
- Workforce development is a priority aspect of Southwest's mission for both internal and external stakeholders. However, community partners see significant opportunity for improved responsiveness and programming, while internal stakeholders rate workforce development as one of the College's greatest performance strengths.
- Both internal and external stakeholders identify service to students (from pre-admissions forward) as in vital need of improvement at Southwest.
 - Admissions processes and customer service at the pre-enrollment stage are perceived to be hindering student access.
 - Stakeholders are concerned that students are not getting sufficient advising support.

Implications and Recommendations

- As Southwest undertakes to improve the design and performance of its student services approach, it should assume a “consumer-centric” perspective that draws on the insights of students, faculty and school/business partners. In addition to supporting effective design, this collaborative approach will reinforce the College’s respect for the needs and views of those it serves.
- The “new leadership” moment at Southwest presents a strong opportunity to refresh the College’s workforce development strategy, as external partners are keen to be involved in setting priorities and imagining possibilities.
- With respect to workforce development, It will be important to ensure that faculty and staff are alert to the expectations of external partners and not complacent about the performance and relevance of the College’s workforce programs.
- As Southwest moves to respond to stakeholder interests in enhanced awareness for the College, messaging and content should focus on performance outcomes (graduation rates, scope of programming, workforce partnerships) as mission and purpose aspects are well understood.