

CASE STUDY

WSU Tri-Cities

How WSU Tri-Cities Capitalizes on Alumni Outcomes Data

Data-driven decisions

Data-driven decisions are often expected these days, especially in data-rich environments like higher education. But reality doesn't always match expectations. Budgets are limited. Access to data can be scarce. And when that happens, higher education professionals can find themselves in a tight spot. For institutions like [Washington State University Tri-Cities](#), which offers students the experiences and opportunities of a big school system in a personalized, small school environment, the data squeeze can be especially apparent.

Following a systemwide alumni outcomes study, WSU Tri-Cities used [GoRecruit](#), a tool to produce infographics based on alumni datasets that can be tailored to specific majors or other subsegments. GoRecruit's influence on campus extends to recruiting strategy, academic program development and student support services.

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For institutions like [Washington State University Tri-Cities](#), which offers students the experiences and opportunities of a big school system in a personalized, small school environment, the data squeeze can be especially apparent. WSU Tri-Cities is one of six campuses in the Washington State University system. That means they get the benefit of larger systemwide initiatives, but sometimes have to fight to tailor those solutions to their on-ground reality.

One such situation arose when the Washington State University system conducted a statewide alumni study. Systemwide alumni data became abundant, and WSU Tri-Cities moved from dealing with a dearth of quantifiable alumni data to being able to know, quantify, and defend their alumni outcomes.



THE CHALLENGE

Making data-informed decisions is difficult without a trusted source for data, especially for small or regional campuses like WSU Tri-Cities.



THE SOLUTION

A systemwide study of alumni outcomes provided data that WSU Tri-Cities could adapt and use for their needs.



THE RESULTS

Alumni data has been used to craft a recruitment strategy, improve curriculum, and help students get funding from federal agencies.

Specifically, WSU Tri-Cities used [GoRecruit](#), a tool to produce infographics based on alumni datasets that can be tailored to specific majors or other subsegments. GoRecruit's influence on campus extends to recruiting strategy, academic program development and student support services.

Let's take a deeper look at what these uses look like. And imagine, if you dare, how difficult it would be to do these things without this data.

Align campaigns around real outcomes data

For a regional campus, which often offers a smaller, more specialized selection of majors than the larger system, it's especially imperative to help students see themselves at that location — and how that campus, in particular, can help them reach their career goals.

Before the alumni data match, WSU Tri-Cities was in just that position. But now, alumni data is part of the recruitment process.

"We have a quiz that students take," says Interim Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Jana Kay Lunstad. "Prospective students have their interests and abilities, and then it [matches them up with majors](#) that we offer on our campus."

Infographics produced by GoRecruit are embedded in the results pages. By giving prospective students essential outcomes information at a point of decision, it's easier for them to make a decision. Not only are prospective students getting a better idea of their options at WSU Tri-Cities, they're also getting real-life data on where those majors could take them in their careers.

And WSU Tri-Cities has plans to expand this use of alumni information into email campaigns, program webpages, freshman seminars, even with students working to get off academic probation. With alumni data distributed across multiple touchpoints, it's easier to create alignment between the multiple stakeholders that deploy these different programs.

Rather than having to come up with a basis for alignment out of thin air, Lunstad can leverage alumni data to facilitate the process. "It's such a relief to have real information," she says.

Dispel myths about learning outcomes

Real information also goes a long way to dispelling myths and misconceptions on campus. For example, it can be easy to get caught up in programmatic or curricular intentions without necessarily seeing what the actual outcomes are.

Lunstad tells the story: "I shared this data with the academic directors so they could see what their graduates were doing. And I got a call from one of our programs saying, 'Hey, we're looking at the GoRecruit data and in all the skills that the students are listing, they're missing the things that we think are most important.' They wanted us to revise it, to reflect what they want their outcomes to be."

There was a disconnect: the program's intended outcomes did not match what alumni listed on their online profiles.

Lunstad took this opportunity to start a conversation with the program. Because alumni outcomes data aggregates directly from student-created profiles, it reflects the reality of how students talk about their skills. "If your graduates are not saying what you want them to say, you need to be communicating with them differently or more intentionally about those outcomes," she says.

From that conversation, the program developed a discipline-specific workshop that gets students thinking about how to present themselves in their resumes and online profiles. This gives the program another way to share what they expect students to be learning in their program, and how to communicate skills and knowledge to potential employers.

"That was not a conversation I was expecting, but it was actually really satisfying," Lunstad says. "Once I explained how the data worked, and they understood that this was student feedback, it was like a little light bulb went off, you know?"

"So often, we're guessing what we think students need and not talking to students about what they actually need. This data is like a little survey of students. It's helping us make decisions."

Jana Kay Lunstad
Interim Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment
WSU TRI-CITIES





Provide employment data for students

Looking at wraparound services, many students rely on third-party funding to complete their degrees. And while funding agencies rightly have policy and procedure to guide the disbursement of funds, students are at the mercy of the larger organization, which relies on data rather than on-ground knowledge. Because of these requirements, students may have to revise their plans based on what agencies, such as the Veterans Administration, will provide funding for.

"I had a student who wanted to study wine science, which is not the most common major," Lunstad says of her previous work as campus registrar, "And the VA was denying him that option because they didn't trust there would be a job after the fact. They're really pushing vets to go into STEM fields. That's where they think there's going to be employment and good salaries."

But WSU Tri-Cities is located in Washington's wine country, which is why the wine science degree exists in the first place. Because the wine industry is flourishing, and WSU Tri-Cities has plenty of industry relationships, students routinely find good jobs. Lunstad just needed to make that clear to the agency.

To advocate for the student, Lunstad provided information based on alumni from the campus, what they've gone on to do, and their salary ranges.

Ultimately, the appeal was successful.

"The student was able to do wine science like he wanted to," Lunstad says. Since then, Lunstad has provided data for students in a number of WSU Tri-Cities' specialized majors.

Without data, there's not much she could have done. But with data, she made a successful case on a student's behalf.

Conclusion

It's often a priority within higher education to make data-driven decisions. But when the vision isn't backed up with resourcing for adequate data, it can put higher ed professionals in a tough spot. They want to communicate the good work that's happening within their college, and help faculty and students achieve their goals, but are running on empty to make that happen.

But it doesn't have to be that way. When it comes to recruitment, program planning, and student support services alike, campuses like WSU Tri-Cities have found that a little data can go a long way. That puts the campus and higher ed professionals like Lunstad in a better spot.

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If you have questions about [Alumni Outcomes](#) or Lightcast's other solutions for higher education, please contact us at lightcast.io/contact. We'd love to learn more about the work you're doing and explore how our data can help!



Following a systemwide alumni outcomes study, the Tri-Cities campus of Washington State University uses the data for recruitment, academic program development and student support services.



Infographics containing real alumni career and estimated earnings data are featured in their recruitment pipeline, demonstrating the outcomes of the majors offered on the campus.



After alumni data revealed unexpected student outcomes, a new course was added to help graduates communicate their skills to potential employers.



By providing defensible data that demonstrates job opportunities, WSU Tri-Cities supports students seeking funding from federal agencies.

About Lightcast

Lightcast, formerly Emsi Burning Glass, delivers job market analytics that empower employers, workers, and educators to make data-driven decisions. The company's artificial intelligence technology analyzes hundreds of millions of job postings and real-life career transitions to provide insight into labor market patterns. This real-time strategic intelligence offers crucial insights, such as what jobs are most in demand, the specific skills employers need, and the career directions that offer the highest potential for workers. Visit lightcast.io for more information.

