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Monmouth, Rutgers among NJ schools providing public service with research surveys at significant cost

Written by Keith Sargeant

Leave it to Rutgers University political science professor David Redlawsk to explain why colleges are in the polling business.

“As a university our mission is public service and education so I think it's all worth everything we put into it for both of those purposes,” said Redlawsk, the director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers. “From a branding standpoint, it's generally a positive thing. Certainly the publicity doesn't hurt but for us it's more about educating our students about engaging people in research and providing a public service for the state.”

It's why universities throughout New Jersey have followed what the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll — the oldest statewide academic survey operation in the country — started 42 years ago with polling centers of their own.

From Fairleigh Dickinson University up north to Richard Stockton College down south and virtually every college in between, New Jersey schools have received plenty of headlines for their poll research as both the New Jersey gubernatorial race between Gov. Chris Christie and Sen. Barbara Buono and the state Senate contest between Newark Mayor Cory Booker and Steve Lonegan heat up.

While every school has its own purpose for why they conduct surveys, most officials agree there are few negatives with engaging the public on issues that stimulate conversation and, in some cases, can impact how policymakers govern.

“Our primary motivations are twofold,” Redlawsk said. “One is a public service motivation — that is we think it is important for New Jerseyans to have some sense of what's going on in public opinion about policy and politics within the state. The second is our educational mission; that's why we involve students in every phase of the process so they have a better idea of how the polling process works.”

Dan Douglas, director of the public policy institute at Richard Stockton College, said last month its Galloway-based school was mentioned 150 times in various media outlets due to its political polls.

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“That doesn't happen in a typical month,” Douglas said. “For us, it creates a great awareness about the college throughout the state, nationally and sometimes even internationally.”

Other universities gain publicity by pursuing current events. Shortly after Superstorm Sandy hit last October, the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll surveyed residents about the storm, collecting data that found, according to school officials, a greater belief in global climate change and a desire for preventative measures in the face of future natural disasters.

Monmouth University, which has been widely lauded for its post-Sandy surveys, is in the midst of its most significant project involving New Jersey residents who were significantly impacted by the storm.

“We obviously take a measure of pride in our political polling but that's just one small piece of what we're all about,” said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth Polling Institute. “One of the things we're proudest of is our work with what's going on with recovery of Sandy. We've had a lot of students trying to find out what the long-term impacts are, and the number of people impacted.”

Is the five-figure price tag worth it?

Surveying the public typically comes at a significant cost, and only a few schools take in money from private organizations or government agencies seeking independent research (none of the schools interviewed for this story receive money from campaigns for their political surveys). The majority of schools outsource the task of telephoning people through random digit dialing, then collect and analyze the data before releasing the poll.

“It really depends on a huge number of factors, the number of people, whether it's a 10-minute survey or a 20-minute survey and the information we're going after,” Redlawsk said of the cost. “Last year we did a question on tattoos, and for that it was easier because you don't have to screen for registered voters.”

A recent Rutgers-Eagleton survey that found Gov. Christie with a 20-point lead over Buono reportedly sampled 925 New Jersey adults through a telephone poll that included 782 land-line and 143 cell-phone calls. According to Redlawsk, a completed cell-phone interview can cost up to \$25 per person and roughly \$19 for landline users.

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“This is very much ballpark,” Redlawsk said, “but all you have to do is multiply it by (925) and you can see it adds up pretty quickly.”

While an average phone survey can easily exceed \$15,000, officials say that price tag is worth it for the headlines it brings to a school.

“If you're a respected poll, it brings positive notice to the school, no question about it,” said Mickey Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. “A poll is an avenue to be known, but you can always buy ads. Beyond that, it's a respectable thing to do.”

Benefits in branding

The Quinnipiac University Poll is considered the gold standard in the business, frequently lauded by USA Today and other national media organizations for its information and accuracy. While Carroll is widely known as the voice of the poll, routinely offering colorful and insightful opinions on tri-state political races, school President John Lahey is credited with the founding of the poll in the late 1980s.

“The example I like to use is when Doug Flutie completed that famous Hail Mary pass, all of a sudden Boston College got on the map and so many other universities decided to put their money into their football programs,” said Terry Golway, director of the Kean University Center for History, Politics and Policy. “In a similar way, Quinnipiac is the B.C. of college polling. No one had ever heard of Quinnipiac — no one knew how to spell it — and now all of a sudden Quinnipiac is mentioned by just about every major media outlet. To me, that is what is driving all of these other polls. It's about branding, it's about getting your name out there, it's about inserting yourself into the conversation about New Jersey politics.”

Carroll conceded that point as well. “Obviously John Lahey did it to make Quinnipiac known but he's also a tremendous politics buff. It's not just an exercise in P.R.,” he said. “Schools are in the knowledge business and the knowledge of how the election process and of what's happening is important.”

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While Rutgers has approximately 10 employees and a few dozen students working in its calling center, Quinnipiac is considerably larger than most other academic polling institutes. It's a seven-day-a-week operation that employs more than 150 students who serve as interviewers for the hundreds of surveys the school produces each year.

“I'll tell you when it turned around for us,” Carroll said. “About three or four years ago people stopped writing ‘a poll by Quinnipiac, a school in Hamden, Conn.’ and just simply wrote ‘Quinnipiac.’ In other words, the branding had taken effect.”

The branding effect is what spurred schools like Kean and Stockton into the polling business as well.

“Frankly all these other polls are better known than ours,” Golway said, “but I still think it’s helped get the Kean brand out there.”

Stockton has quickly emerged as a legitimate polling center thanks to its unique business model, its director said.

“I believe we’re the only public college that has its own calling center run by students,” said Douglas, who last year opted to use the money it paid to an outside vendor to pay the 100 students working in the Stockton calling center. “Educating our students on this research process is a big part of our mission, as is engaging with the South Jersey community and letting lawmakers know how they feel about certain issues.”

Polling for the greater good

While Stockton’s polls focus on both the major statewide and local legislative elections, Monmouth’s surveys often transcend politics.

“Right after Sandy hit we went a month later with one of our polls, spending 25 minutes asking questions about what happened,” Murray said. “It wasn’t about politics at that point, it was about understanding the impact. Our job was to extract the pulse of what was going on at the time, and it was also to make a contribution to public life.”

Founded in 2005, Monmouth’s polling center takes on projects through a process that includes telephone interviews, mail responses and in-person surveys. Once collected, Murray’s team analyzes the data before releasing its findings for public consumption.

“I don’t think there are too many universities that regret it as long as they do it well,” Murray said. “The problem right now is the field is getting very crowded. New Jersey has more polls than any other state going, and unfortunately they are widely varied in accuracy and it makes it harder for the ones who have been doing it for a long time and working hard to do something that contributes to the public good.”