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Research polls aid students, residents

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The Monmouth University Polling Institute conducted a Sandy Recovery Survey in Keansburg. Poll canvasser and Monmouth University student, Pandush Mitre of Wall (right), looks on while Mike Keelen of Keansburg (left) completes the poll questionnaire. Frank Galipo/Special to the Press



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

“Certainly the publicity doesn’t hurt,” said Redlawsk, the director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers. “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 with polling centers of their own after what the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll — the oldest statewide academic survey operation in the country — started 42 years ago.

From Fairleigh Dickinson University in the north to Richard Stockton College in the south and virtually every college in between, New Jersey schools have received plenty of headlines for their poll research as the 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 conducting the surveys, most officials agree there are few negatives to 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.

“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 studying current events. Monmouth University is currently polling New Jersey residents who were significantly impacted by Superstorm Sandy. Officials say the goal of the grant-funded project is to determine whether impacted residents have resources necessary for recovery.

“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 University Polling Institute. “One of the things we’re proudest of is our work with what’s going on with recovery of Sandy.”

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 .

The majority of schools outsource the task of telephoning people through random digit dialing, then collect and analyze the data before releasing the poll to the public.

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