


The Questions Developed to Cull Students

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As debate continues over drowning bunnies and Mount St. Mary's questionnaire for new students, concerns are raised about ethics and legality of the survey.

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By

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The policy debate at Mount St. Mary's University has from the start involved more than President Simon Newman's [comparison](#) of at-risk students to bunnies that should be drowned or killed with a Glock.

Faculty members and the provost (whom Newman has since demoted) objected to plans to give all freshmen a survey and then to use the survey to identify new students who might -- in their first weeks in college -- be encouraged to quit before Mount St. Mary's would have to report them as having been enrolled and thus dropping out. The theory behind the plan was to increase the university's retention rate.

Amid all the attention to Newman's metaphor and his subsequent [firing of two faculty members \(one with tenure\)](#) for failing to show sufficient loyalty in carrying out his retention plan, relatively little discussion has focused on the questionnaire itself. It is now circulating, and faculty members at Mount St. Mary's (speaking privately, fearing for their jobs) and outside experts (speaking publicly) say it shows just how problematic the retention program was. (The university also sent a new letter to one of the professors it fired, referring to the possibility of reconciliation, but it is unclear what would happen in the event of meetings the letter appears to propose.)

The survey now circulating, a copy of which was obtained by *Inside Higher Ed*, stresses to students that there "are no wrong answers," and it says the university would use it to provide advice to students on how to make the most of their time at Mount St. Mary's. Nowhere in the survey does it refer to the goal of culling the class, and the university did not respond to emails seeking to find out if anyone attempted to use the survey that way, as Newman had urged.

The survey starts out innocuously, asking questions about potential new academic programs in subjects such as emergency management, data analytics and sales.

Then it starts to ask students questions about whether they feel success is related to hard work, whether fixed intelligence exists, how prepared they generally feel for class and so forth.

But the questions that have attracted the most criticism examine mental health, possible disabilities and financial challenges.

Students were asked whether, in the past week, they felt depressed, sad or unable to "shake off the blues." They were also asked to respond to statements such as, "I thought my life had been a failure."

In later parts of the survey, students were asked if they had a learning disability and whether they were confident that their family could finance their education.

And significantly, the survey specifically asks for each student's six-digit identification number.

In various leaked emails to Newman (and in interviews), faculty members said that there was nothing wrong with outreach to students with learning disabilities or mental health or financial challenges. But they said they viewed it as unethical if not illegal to do such outreach without telling students that their answers would be used to determine who might be discouraged from staying at the university.

Inside Higher Ed asked Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (and somebody who could be quoted by name), to review the Mount St. Mary's survey.

His response: "I have concerns about the Mount St. Mary's survey on two fronts. The survey is asking questions about depression, anxiety and other psychological issues, while at the same time linking these responses to individual student ID numbers. I would expect, at the very least, that a survey of this nature would be confidential -- meaning that the individual responses could be connected to an individual, but that connection would not be readily available. For example, similar questions are asked in the American College Health Association College Health Survey, but there the respondents are assigned a randomly generated response ID number."

Kruger added, "Related to this concern is what might be inferred as the background purpose of the survey -- to determine which students are more likely to struggle academically and psychologically and then to encourage these students to withdraw. This kind of approach is antithetical to the purpose of higher education. By contrast, colleges and universities should employ services and supports that help students overcome barriers to degree completion."

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