



Mark Safferstone

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In today's highly competitive business environment where information rules, the ability to create and analyze data quickly is critically important," says Mark Safferstone. As associate dean for assessment and outreach in the College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of Mary Washington, Safferstone's work is largely data-driven. Since CGPS opened in 1999, he has explored and used various assessment tools in his ongoing quest to harness data that can be strategically deployed to support the college's mission.

That mission explains the unique niche CGPS has carved out for itself in the busy, transient, commuter world of the I-95 corridor between Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia. In creating the college, university officials sought to appeal to the working professional whose educational needs were more specific than the usual software-package training offered by community colleges, and more demanding than could be satisfied by continuing-education programs. The mission of CGPS is twofold: to provide quality, part-time adult degree programs and to support the economic development of the region.

"Although we are aligned with a traditional liberal-arts institution, we serve different markets. CGPS is regionally focused, and faces substantial competition for students. We must differentiate ourselves," he says.

In progressing through several stages of assessment sophistication, Safferstone has moved, not only from paper-based forms to an interactive online survey platform, but from an assessment philosophy of reaction to one of anticipation.

"Our earlier objective was to conduct course evaluations," he says. "Now, we use assessment to provide data for decision making across the enterprise. The availability of the interactive online tool has driven our strategy and has changed the way we do business."

Safferstone's career itself has been one of eclectic transitions. Starting out as a public high school teacher in the early 1970s, he has since worked in a variety of environments, including the private sector, academia, state government, and even the Virginia Department of Corrections, where he served as the assistant training manager for programs at the Academy for Staff Development. He has taught human resource management or development at George Washington University, St. Thomas University, Mary Washington College, Marymount University, Central Michigan University, and Pepperdine, and currently serves as a consultant to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies offers a bachelor's degree in professional studies, an MBA, and a master's in education. Safferstone is also responsible for designing and managing custom corporate management development programs and consulting engagements for such clients as GEICO and Collegiate Funding Services. Whether for a new degree program or a corporate client, assessment prior to design is conducted in the same way:

"We do not take a 'Field of Dreams,' build-it-and-they-will-come approach here. It is imperative that we understand our marketplace," Safferstone says.

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