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INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Volume 3, Issue 1

September 8, 2003

ASSESSMENT NEWS

SNC Visits Higher Learning Commission

Dean Michael Marsden and OIE Director Robert Rutter met with Dr. Robert Appleson, Associate Director of the Higher Learning Commission and SNC Liaison on July 16, 2003 at the downtown Chicago offices of the North Central Association. The meeting was substantive and produced a number of important clarifications regarding our 2005 focused visit.

- The assessment emphasis of the focussed visit will be on “closing the loop”. That is, that SNC has a routine and ongoing process for the collection, analysis and use of assessment data to improve its academic student life, and Mission & Heritage programs.
- While direct evidence of student learning is an essential element in the overall assessment mix, other forms of assessment (e.g. placement and survey data, curriculum audits) play legitimate roles as well.
- The “levels of implementation” are intended as a guide for consultant/evaluators. In applying the levels, institutions should not lose sight of the underlying intent. The levels should be viewed holistically, not as a checklist.
- Institutions and academic units should decide how best to assess their programs. While HLC may point to apparent gaps or suggest additional means of assessment, HLC’s primary interest is ensuring that assessment is occurring and that the data generated are being used for continuous program improvement.

- Progress on strategic planning and funding, as it relates to accomplishing our strategic planning goals, will be reviewed in the 2005-2006 focussed visit.
- Two sections of the site-visit report Challenges (p.51) and Advice and Suggestions (p. 52) provide the best framework for the College’s preparation for the focussed visit. SNC should read these sections as a set of action steps and be prepared to address each point.
- HLC encourages SNC to draw upon the expertise of an experienced team chair through an on-site previsit consultation. Several possible veteran chairs with assessment expertise were suggested.

Assessment at Other Colleges...

The following is excerpted from an article published in Assessment Update, November-December, 2002, Volume 14, Number 6. The authors, Assessment Coordinators at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Southern Illinois University-Carbondale respectively, draw conclusions that reflect the philosophy of St. Norbert College’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

Don’t Bring Faculty to Assessment, Bring Assessment to Faculty

By: Jessica L. Johnson, Thomas C. Calhoun

Assessment coordinators frequently are asked by faculty, “Why should we spend our valuable time assessing student learning outcomes?” If we reply, “Because our regional (or our professional) accreditor mandates it” or “So we can be accountable (Continued on Page 2)

Inside this issue:

Don’t Bring Faculty to Assessment,	2
Jack Williamsen, Jeff Ritter & Dustin Thill Attend Na-	2
Institutional Assessment Plan Ready for Faculty Considera-	3
Summary of 2002-2003 Funded Projects	4

Assessment Conference Possibilities

90th Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges & Universities, “Practicing Liberal Education”, January 21-24, 2004, Washington, D.C.

AAHE Focus on Learning Workshop: Building Learner—Centered Institutions: Developing Institutional Strategies for Assessing and Improving Student Learning, January 23-25, 2004, San Ramon Valley Conference Center, San Ramon, California

Institute on College Student Values February 5-7, 2004, Turnbull Conference Center, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.

Association of American Colleges and Universities, General Education and Assess-

Don't Bring Faculty to Assessment, Bring Assessment to Faculty (Continued from page 1)

to our constituents,” they are not convinced. Instead, we might offer, “Because this information can give *you* previously untapped insights into *your* educational programs that will help *your unit* determine how to use its resources and improve its educational programs.” The italicized words emphasize that the primary purpose of outcomes assessment is to serve the needs and interests of faculty and enhance their contributions to educational program.

Use of Existing Evidence. Initial assessment plans often end up being a meaningless exercise because measurement was added in a rush to get something going. Units are encouraged to continue using add-on methods if those methods provide meaningful information. If not, units are encouraged to analyze existing products from a broader perspective for three reasons. First, it signals that the process is to be molded to fit faculty needs. Second, it reveals that assessment does not require elaborate additional effort but can take advantage of existing information with minor modifications. Third, it reinforces the idea that assessment should be integrated into daily activities, where it is more likely to contribute to decision making.

Purview of All Faculty. Teaching and learning has traditionally been viewed as a private transaction, self-governed by individual faculty members and students; outcomes assessment makes teaching and learning a departmental responsibility. Units are encouraged to involve all faculty in identifying learning objectives, collectively reaching conclusions from assessment evidence, and deciding how to address areas in need to improvement. If assessment becomes the purview of all faculty, it is more likely to be perceived as a means to address questions they care about rather than an activity that is conducted only to satisfy an external audience.

Collecting Evidence About Issues of Interest. If faculty use assessment to address their issues, they can gain a sense of how assessment evidence enriches their understanding of student learning and enables decision making based on information rather than intuition. This perspective can motivate individual assessment in, because faculty have a vested interest.

Making It Manageable. Faculty are encouraged to develop long-term plans that begin to focus specifically on learning objectives that are most critical or on learning issues currently facing the department. Alternatively, a unit might focus on a selected assessment method that is easy to administer, in order to achieve success and build support. This reinforces the idea that our expectations are reasonable and that we respect the numerous demands placed on faculty time.

Importance of Flexibility. The idea that an assessment plan should be flexible is promoted. A unit does not have to adhere to its original plan if the evidence collected is not informative. We argue that half of what is learned when conducting outcomes assessment is about the process itself. Unit faculty learn that we are interested in discovering whether the process is informative to them, not just whether they have one in place.

Jack Williamsen, Jeff Ritter & Dustin Thill Attend National Conference on Student Retention

By: Jack Williamsen

General Comments related to the Conference

The conference was hosted by Noel-Levitz, a national consulting firm to colleges and universities on retention and related matters (e.g. academic advisement, admissions). Dustin Thill said, “The information at the conference was invaluable in the areas of Admissions, Retention, and Advisement. I learned more during these three days than I had at the previous four conferences I had attended.”

The majority of presenters were from institutions who had something to share about their own retention efforts. Because of the wide range of institutions presenting (from 4 year public to two year proprietary institutions), the information they provided ranged widely in terms of its “back-home” relevance for us at St. Norbert. I selected presentations based on brief program descriptions in the conference take-home binder and was disappointed in my selections only once.

Impressions taken from the Conference

To the extent it is possible to generalize from the welter of impressions obtained from the conference presentations I attended, the following come to mind:

1. Competent academic advisement of freshmen is the sine qua non of successful retention efforts.
2. A well thought-through first year experience course is the intervention second in importance to academic advisement in successful retention efforts.
3. Solid information on retention of students is necessary for effective planning of retention efforts.
4. Student “engagement” (the modern equivalent of Alexander Astin’s term, “involvement,” first used over 20 years ago) is consistently shown to increase the probability of retention. One simple (but powerful) measure of how engaged a student feels with the institution is (1) the gap between prematriculation expectations and subsequent realities of the college experience or (2) the somewhat similar gap between student-rated importance of various dimensions of the institution and corresponding satisfaction with them. Institutions that know which gaps exist (they have asked students) and take tangible steps to reduce them improve retention.
5. Efforts to assist students succeed in college should help them determine their unique talents and then provide guidance and experiences designed to strengthen their talents through additional knowledge and skill training. The ‘standard model,’ which focuses on remediation of weaknesses and deficits and

(Continued on Page 3)

Jack Williamsen, Jeff Ritter & Dustin Thill Attend National Conference on Student Retention

(Continued from Page 2)

neglects talent enhancement, may lead to a 'well-rounded' individual but does not promote individual excellence (which comes from capitalizing on unique talent). Providing support for the enhancement of strengths is an involvement-producing institutional intervention.

Implications for 'back-home' application

1. Emphasize academic advisement of entering freshmen. Initiate a pilot program in which selected advisors from each academic division have "freshmen only" advisees and are trained by the Director and the Retention Coordinator, training to include the use of the Noel-Levitz *Retention Management System (RMS) College Student Inventory*. Track the retention effectiveness of the pilot program as a prelude to broader application.

2. Implement the use of the StrengthsQuest program.

Use with one or more of four freshmen subgroups: students taking Freshmen Seminar, undecided students, diversity students, and underachieving students. Students from these subgroups might profit most from a focus on the development of their unique talents and the enhancement of these talents in a college environment. In addition to the above, the program appears to me to be a potentially valuable resource for Student Life as well (for example, in leadership training, training of Raps, developmental counseling, etc.)

3. Enhance and invigorate the First Year Experience at SNC.

Most successful FYE programs are mandatory and carry some form of academic credit (the latter justifies the former). Our research on the SNC FYE indicates that freshmen students are most concerned about what it takes to be academically successful. Other concerns related to adjustment to college life may be important, but they are secondary to academic issues for most students. We should capitalize on these concerns and address them in ways that enhance student success and satisfaction (once again, another way to increase 'engagement').

4. Discover and address sources of student dissatisfaction to the extent possible. For at least ten years, the College has asked students about their satisfaction with academics and various College offices (using the Current Student Survey). Since 2000, our graduating seniors have completed the College Student Survey ("Sr. CIRP"), an additional, somewhat different, source of "satisfaction" items. Little has been done with results from these surveys.

The bottom line is this: the more satisfied a student is with their experience of St. Norbert, the more emotionally-bonded ("engaged") he/she is likely to be, and the more likely to graduate. Sixty percent of students who leave St. Norbert leave with GPAs that would allow them to continue—that's more than half of all "departures." Not every student in this majority leaves because of remediable dissatisfactions, but surely some must.

Institutional Assessment Plan Ready for Faculty Consideration

The College Assessment Committee developed and adopted an Institutional Assessment Plan during Spring, 2002-2003. The Committee will be seeking endorsement of the plan from the Faculty Assembly, the Administrative Advisory Committee (AAC) and each Division represented by the AAC, and the Student Government Association this Fall. The Institutional Assessment Plan can be reviewed on the OIE web site (www.snc.edu/oie). Comments and suggestions are welcome.



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