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INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Volume 2, Issue 2

October 16, 2002

Parting Can Be Such Sweet Sorrow: Retention at St. Norbert

By Jack Williamsen, Title III Retention Coordinator

Until this past year, our desire to study factors affecting retention at St. Norbert far outstripped the College's ability to do so. However, the Title III grant provides for the position of a "retention coordinator" whose primary mission is to improve retention of five freshmen groups the College's Title III consultant designated as "at risk" for premature departure. The five groups are: U.S. diversity students, disabled students, underachieving students, students with academic deficiencies (writing/math) at time of admission, and students uncertain about career choices.

Our "at risk" subgroups form a (to-be-determined) portion of all students who leave St. Norbert before graduation. Logically, it makes sense to begin by studying SNC's retention 'big picture' before focusing on special groups. Identification of factors affecting our retention generally provides a base from which to search for additional variables that are specific to the departures of students from the at risk subgroups identified in our Title III grant.

After several months of gathering and integrating information from several data files on campus, here is some of what we know about retention at St. Norbert. (Continued on Page 2)

www.snc.edu/oie OIE Web Site: A Work in Progress

Julia Gressick, a SNC senior in Elementary Education, with Patricia Wery, OIE Administrative Secretary spent much of the summer constructing a web site for the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Although the site will continue to grow and evolve, it is now ready for review by the SNC community. The web site will serve a number of important purposes. It will provide basic information about the OIE, the Title III Strengthening Institutions Grant, and NCA/Higher Education Commission assessment expectations. It will make mini-grant proposal forms easily accessible and chart progress on our retention initiative and review of general education. To encourage greater use of data, the web site will provide ready access to existing campus survey data and catalogue academic and student life program assessment plans and reports. The site will include informative power point presentations based on these data, a series of outcomes assessment tutorials, as well as directories of on-campus and web assessment resources. When completed, the web site will allow SNC to better communicate the breadth and extent of its assessment efforts to the North Central Association.

The OIE invites all faculty and staff to review the site and provide feedback. Please communicate your ideas, suggestions, or concerns to Bob Rutter, Director of Institutional Effectiveness or any member of the Institutional Effectiveness Team. Also, if (Continued on Page 4)

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Assessment Conference Possibilities

- The Collaboration: 2002 Regional Workshops: October 18: Exploring the New Assessments, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI and October 21: Managing Departments Legally and Ethically: Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN.
- 2002 Assessment Institute: November 3-5, 2002, IUPUI.
- A Day at Alverno College: Teaching and Assessing Student Abilities: November 7, 2002, April 3, 2003, and November 6, 2003.
- Achieving and Sustaining Excellence in Higher Education, University of Wisconsin-Stout, November 22, 2002, Airport Embassy Suites Hotel, Minneapolis, MN.
- NCTLA Assessment Institute: Baltimore, MD: November 7-9, 2002; San Juan, PR: February 20-22, 2003; New York City, NY: March 20-22, 2003.
- General Education & Assessment of Student Learning, Co-sponsored with the Associated New American Colleges and Butler University: February 27-March 1, 2003, Philadelphia, PA.
- Assessment of General Education and Values Assessment in Higher Education Workshop, St. Norbert College: April 10 & 11, 2003.

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- *The overall graduation rate of entering freshmen classes since 1990 has ranged between 70-75%.*
- *The overall graduation rate of U.S. diversity students during this time period has averaged 45-50%.*
- *About 85% of our majority students return for the sophomore year.*
- *About 75% of our U.S. diversity students return for the sophomore year.*
- *55-60% of all students who do not graduate from St. Norbert leave before the sophomore year.*
- *An additional 25% leave before the junior year.*
- *About 60% of all departures are by students in good academic standing (i.e., with cumulative GPAs 2.00 or higher).*
- *About 40% of all departures are by students not in good academic standing (i.e., with cumulative GPAs less than 2.00).*

The distinction between departing students in academic trouble and those without such difficulties is important. Combining the two subgroups is the primary reason virtually all research studies on retention (including those conducted at SNC) show that high school academic achievement is the best (but not perfect) single predictor of institutional graduation rates. High school academic achievement has a substantial relationship with college academic achievement and satisfactory academic achievement at the college level is a *sine qua non* required for graduation.

The failure to distinguish between departing students who are in academic trouble vs. those who are not obscures some significant differences between them. These differences are potentially important in the design of interventions intended to reduce premature departures.

Take a look at the table below. It reports the median (the score above and below which half the scores fall) for ACT subtests and composite, high school and SNC cumulative GPAs, and total number of courses completed at St. Norbert. In each comparison, the difference between the two groups of departed students is statistically robust, strongly suggest-

ing the finding is not the result of random variation but is "real".

Departure Subgroup→	In Good Standing	Not in Good Standing
ACT English	24	21
ACT Math	23	21
ACT Reading	24	22
ACT Reasoning	24	22
ACT Composite	24	21
High School GPA	3.03	2.65
SNC GPA	2.81	1.53
Total SNC Courses	9.00	6.00

The information in the table overwhelmingly points to the unsurprising conclusion that students who leave the College with subpar GPAs enter SNC with lower test scores and a weaker record of academic achievement in high school than their counterparts with satisfactory SNC GPAs. They also complete fewer courses while here, again an expected result. The average number of courses completed before departure by both subgroups (9.00 for "voluntary," 6.00 for "forced" departures) is consistent with our general finding that the majority of all departures (about 80%) occur by the end of the sophomore year.

Although students who leave in good standing have better academic credentials than those with SNC GPAs less than 2.00 (the College's cutoff for "good standing" status), they are not as strong as students who graduate from St. Norbert. Take a look at the following table where, again, median scores are used.

Subgroup→	Departed in Good Standing	Graduated from St. Norbert
ACT English	24	24
ACT Math	23	23
ACT Reading	24	24
ACT Reasoning	24	23
ACT Composite	24	24
High School GPA	3.03	3.41
SNC GPS	2.81	3.19

ACT scores are virtually identical for the two groups, while GPAs show more variation. For the sake of argument, let's assume that the difference in SNC GPA reflects—at least in part—the fact that most departing students leave after a year or so, a year (freshman) when one expects to see lower-than-expected grades because of transition difficulties, time needed to adjust to college academic life, relative immaturity, etc. That leaves high school GPA as the variable of interest.

The high school GPA is a record of academic accomplishment over four years. It reflects—among other things—the combined effects of intellectual ability, study and time management skills, and motivation to achieve. Assume for the moment that ACT scores primarily reflect "academic



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ability.” It does not appear there is much difference between voluntary departures and graduates in ability as assessed by ACT results. But what about such factors as motivation and study/time management skills?

We looked for clues by examining items from the *Student Information Form*, a questionnaire administered annually to college freshmen across the nation (including St. Norbert) under the sponsorship of the *Cooperative Institutional Research Council (CIRP)*.

Several *SIF* items ask about activities during the senior year of high school. Some activity items suggest a certain lack of academic conscientiousness. These included turning homework in late and oversleeping and missing class. Even after controlling for the impact of high school GPA, the more a student reported doing either or both of the above, the less likely she or he was to graduate from St. Norbert (probably because the pattern was continued into college).

A cavalier disregard for standard academic requirements is not the only factor detrimental to successful completion of a degree from St. Norbert. Look at the following two tables, which report the percentage of SNC freshmen (by ultimate SNC graduation status) who consumed beer or wine or liquor during their high school senior year at one of three levels: *not at all, occasionally, or frequently*.

Frequency of Beer Consumption during Senior Year

	Not in Good Standing			Voluntary Departure			Graduated		
	None	Occas.	Frequent	None	Occas.	Frequent	None	Occas.	Frequent
Males	27%	48%	25%	33%	50%	17%	39%	49%	12%
Females	27%	57%	16%	43%	48%	9%	50%	45%	5%

Frequency of Wine or Liquor Consumption during Senior Year of H.S.

	Not in Good Standing			Voluntary Departure			Graduated		
	None	Occas.	Frequent	None	Occas.	Frequent	None	Occas.	Frequent
Males	36%	47%	17%	44%	47%	9%	44%	49%	7%
Females	23%	64%	13%	33%	61%	6%	43%	53%	4%

Note that--although males consistently consume more often than females regardless of graduation status or beverage--both sexes show the same pattern: students not in good standing at time of departure consumed more often than their voluntarily departing counterparts who, in turn, consumed more often than students who graduated from St. Norbert. Heavy alcohol consumption is hazardous to physical health in the long term. Its negative association with academic accomplishment is much more immediate.

Students who leave St. Norbert in good standing consume alcohol in high school at frequencies somewhat higher than

those who remain to graduate. They also signal their ambivalence about graduating from SNC in their responses to a *SIF* item that asks about the likelihood a student will “transfer to another college before graduating.” Choices are “No Chance,” “Very little Chance,” “Some Chance,” and “Very Good Chance.”

The table below compares entering freshmen who (1) later left not in good standing (“*Forced Departure*”), or (2) left with satisfactory GPAs (“*Voluntary Departures*”), or (3) graduated from SNC on two *SIF* items. The first item shows the percent freshmen who indicated there was “*some*” or a “*very good*” chance they would transfer. The bottom section of the table reports “*Very Good Chance*” responses to the item, “*Be satisfied with my freshman college.*”

SNC Subgroup→	Forced Departure	Voluntary Departure	Graduated from SNC
Transfer from SNC (<i>some</i> + <i>very good</i> chance responses)	25%	34%	23%
Be Satisfied w/ SNC (<i>very good</i> Chance responses Only)	62%	57%	65%

(Percentage of each subgroup endorsing response options indicated in first column)

As the table indicates, about 1/3rd of students who leave St. Norbert in good standing signal their intent to transfer before the first day of classes (the *SIF* is typically administered during orientation). Students who leave under academic pressure are more like their peers who continue to graduation than their voluntary counterparts who also leave.

The voluntary departure group also contains fewer freshmen who are rather certain (“*very good chance*”) they will be satisfied with St. Norbert. Although a majority of the freshmen who ultimately leave believe they are likely to be satisfied with their SNC education, more (close to 2/3rd) graduates hold this view. The statistical association between transferring and expected satisfaction is reliable and moderate in strength (correlation of about -.30).

SUMMARY

Remember those public service advertisements that end with “.....is everyone’s business”? Well, “retention” is a word that can appropriately begin the sentence. We already know that the majority of students who leave St. Norbert do so by the end of the freshman year. Anyone, staff or faculty, who has contact with freshmen can be alert to signs of potential difficulties and offer support or referral.

Research findings and theoretical models of student retention point to the need to avoid early academic failure. Such failures, even if modest (e.g., a failed class) erode the academic bond between student and college and thus need to be explored, not ignored, to assess causes and consequences.

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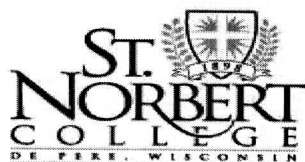
Just as important, research and theory indicate, are the social bonds that link freshmen to faculty, staff, and peers. Faculty members, for example, who have out-of-class contacts with freshmen or who create classroom learning environments that support active participation make a valuable contribution by simply increasing contact. Similarly, College staff who have freshmen in work-study positions and take some personal interest in "how things are going" show support and concern that is invaluable. And peer groups who model and encourage behaviors that support positive associations with the College and its values provide essential bonds that increase chances for successful completion of a degree at St. Norbert. Simple stuff all, but vital to the improvement of retention.

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OIE Web Site: A Work in Progress (Continued from Page 1)

you believe something is missing (e.g. data, a particular report, an updated plan), please let us know. We anticipate using this site as the centerpiece of our presentation to the NCA site team when they return to campus in 2005.

Currently, the OIE web site is not accessible externally. It can not be located by any browser and is accessible only with a valid SNC username and ID. While parts of the site are likely to become publicly accessible in the future (e.g. basic information, Common Data Set, IPEDS), it is anticipated that much of the campus data will remain accessible only to SNC users. Security will remain on the site until all campus units have had a chance to review the site and provide input. After gathering community input, the Assessment Committee and the AAC will make final decisions about which parts of the site will be made accessible to the public.



Office of Institutional Effectiveness



- ➔ About the OIE
- ➔ Institutional Assessment Plan
- ➔ General Education Program Assessment
- ➔ Retention Initiative
- ➔ Institutional Profile
- ➔ Survey Data
- ➔ Academic Outcomes Assessment
- ➔ Student Life Outcomes Assessment
- ➔ Special Project Reports and Presentations
- ➔ Assessment News
- ➔ Tutorial Help
- ➔ NCA Accreditation
- ➔ Resources



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