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Assessment News

Office of Institutional Effectiveness

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INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Assessment News

February 21, 2008

Volume 7, Issue 3

Assessment Isn't Going Away Anytime Soon

Last Spring, a six page issue of Assessment News (www.snc.edu/oie/news/Vol.6issue6)

traced the evolution of discussions in Washington, D.C. about the future of regional accreditation and College and University accountability for student learning. While none of the more radical proposals (e.g. national accreditation, uniform assessments and requirements for reporting student learning, direct institutional comparisons) prevailed, many higher education organizations have accepted the inevitability of increased public accountability and some form of public disclosure of assessment information. Last year's discussions made it clear that the ability of Colleges and Universities to maintain control over the means, scope, and outcomes of student learning assessment depends on some form of voluntary compliance.

W. Robert Connor, President of the Teagle Foundation explained it this way.

"To many people outside the enterprise, American higher education looks, I suspect, like a great ocean liner, vast and powerful, with multiple decks and accommodations for a broad clientele, excellent recreational facilities, dining options for every dietary preference, excellent services of every conceivable type, state of the art equipment, and talented and steadily growing support staffs. It is unquestionably the finest anywhere, something everyone else envies. But some of our fellow citizens have been wondering whether it is on course, indeed, whether it knows where it is heading, and whether it is too cumbersome to change course. Is it pricing itself out of its market? Has it become obsolete, destined to end up high and dry somewhere in an educational dessert?"

Many of those doubts were given loud expression over the last year or so through a series of reports highly critical of American higher education, and most recently through a set of recommendations emanating from the federal Department of Education, the so-called Spellings Commission. The most challenging of those recommendations--involving a dramatic expansion of federal oversight of higher education--seem, at this writing, to continue the nautical
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Interest in Different Points of View: Does it make a difference?

By: Caressa Swanson

Freshman Research Fellow

Office of Institutional Effectiveness

Editor's Note: A liberal arts education is intended to be "broadening," opening the minds of students to new ideas, areas of knowledge, and viewpoints not likely to be present in a more profession- or career-based curriculum. To derive the maximum benefit from a liberal arts curriculum such as ours, it is certainly desirable for students to display an attitude of curiosity and to be open to the "new." We wondered whether entering freshman who seemed to have this "openness" would also report other academically-desirable attitudes and behaviors at rates greater than the freshman class as a whole. The article by Caressa Swanson, Freshman Research Fellow for the OIE, summarizes what she discovered about her own 2007 freshman class.

Introduction

In reviewing items from the 2007 *Freshman Survey*, we found statistically reliable differences between the subgroup of freshman who answered "*very true of me*" and the entire freshman class for the item "*I am interested in points of view different from my own.*" These differences occurred on survey items of both an academic and social/interpersonal nature. Four hundred ninety nine entering freshmen completed the 2007 *Freshman Survey*.. Two hundred thirty three of them (48%) answered "*very true of me*" to the "*interested in points of view different from my own*" item.

Findings: Academic

The tables below show the percentage of freshmen in the "open to viewpoints" subgroup and in the entire freshman class who responded as indicated to five academic and intellectual items from the *Survey*. Note that in every case a greater percentage of "viewpoints" freshmen responded in the academically-desirable direction. All differences between groups are statistically reliable.

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Assessment Conference Possibilities

AAC&U, Integrative Designs for General Education and Assessment, February 21-23, 2008, The Westin Copley Place, Boston, Massachusetts, February 21-23, 2008.

Higher Learning Commission, 13th Annual Meeting, April 11-15, 2008, Hyatt Regency Chicago, IL

2008 NC State Undergraduate Assessment "Breaking Barriers: Building a Culture of Assessment", April 25-27, 2008, Embassy Suites Hotel, Cary, NC.

Higher Learning Commission, Commitment vs. Compliance: Building Shared Responsibility and an Institutional Culture for Assessing & Improving Student Learning, May 28-30, 2008, Lisle, IL.

Higher Learning Commission, Making a Difference in Student Learning: Assessment as Core Strategy. July 23-25, 2008, Lisle, IL.

Interest in Different Points of View: Does it make a difference? (Continued from Page 1)

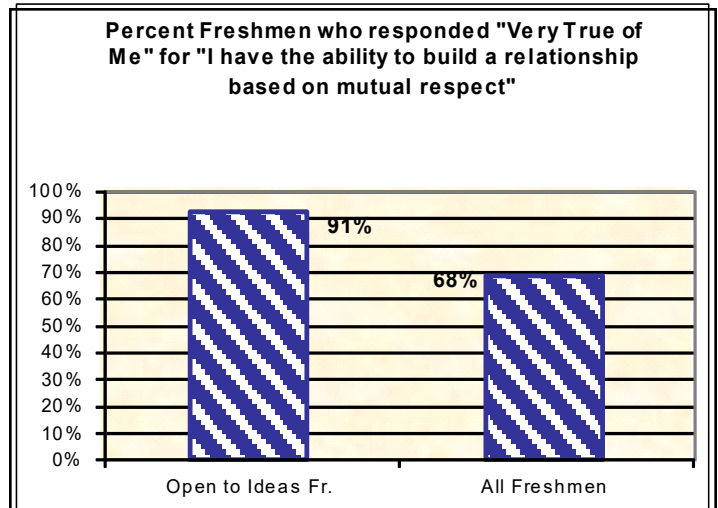
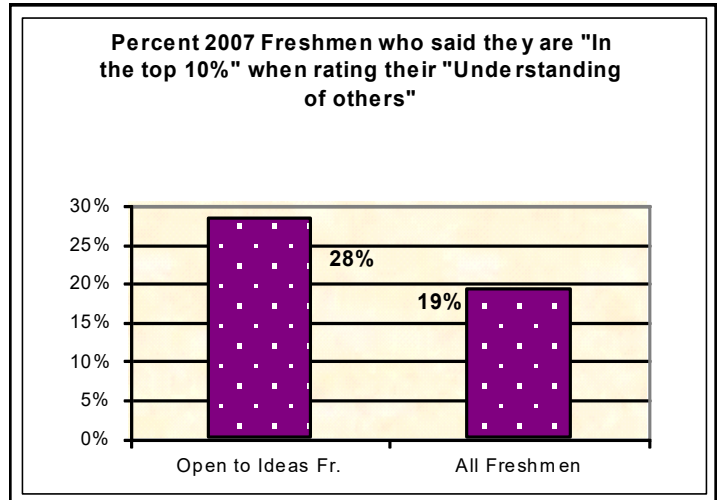
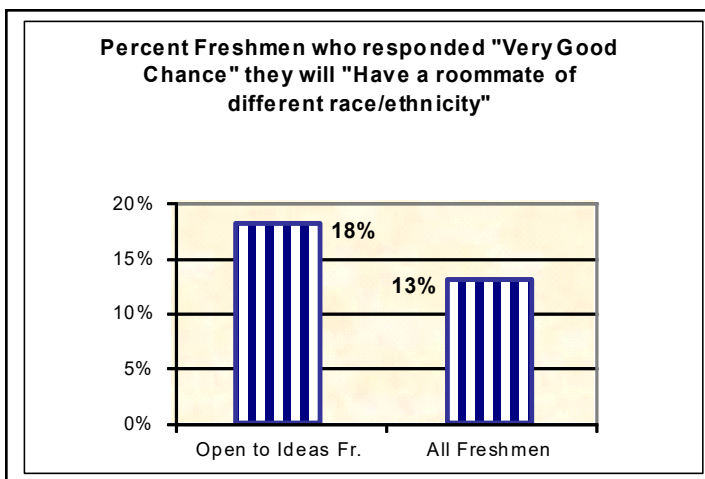
Percent 2007 Freshman who responded "Frequently" for the following survey items:		
Survey Item	Open to Viewpoints Fr.	All Freshmen
Ask questions in class	66%	58%
Seek alternative solutions to a problem	48%	39%

Percent 2007 Freshman who responded "Very Important/Essential" for the survey item:		
Survey Item:	Open to Viewpoints Fr.	All Freshmen
The importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life	56%	44%

Percent 2007 Freshman who responded "Very Good Chance" for the survey item:		
Survey Item:	Open to Viewpoints Fr.	All Freshmen
Chance will communicate regularly with professors	58%	45%

Findings: Co-curricular

Charts showing social/interpersonal differences follow next. Findings are similar to those noted for the academic/intellectual items. Again, differences between the "open to viewpoints" subgroup and all freshmen are statistically reliable.



Conclusion

Findings from this small study indicate that being "open to points of view *different from my own*" is associated with a variety of self-reported intellectually- and personally-desirable characteristics. These characteristics are an attractive complement to the kind of education St. Norbert provides its students.



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Assessment Isn't Going Away Anytime Soon

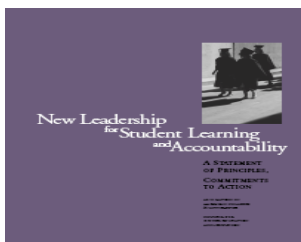
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metaphor, dead in the water. But the underlying concerns have not gone away, nor are they likely to at a time when costs are rising rapidly, global competition is increasing, and employers are complaining that college graduates are often ill prepared for the workplace. (The Association of American Colleges and Universities' National Survey of Employers finds that "63 percent of employers believe that recent college graduates do not have the skills they need to succeed in the global economy." See www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/GloralCentury_ExecSum_final.pdf.)

Several professional organizations and their member institutions have taken steps to address the public's doubts about higher education and forestall the expansion of federal oversight of higher education. Here are four examples of what has occurred in the last year.

- Over 600 Colleges and Universities (including SNC) have joined U-CAN, an early effort to help prospective students make their College decision based on assessment data.
- Invitations are out to join the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) which like U-CAN employs a standard template filled with data, but unlike U-CAN devotes 3 of 5 template pages to assessment data.
- Over 250 Colleges and Universities are allowing prospective students to review their National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data through the U.S.A Today website.
- Colleges like Augustana and Hope College now publish institutional assessment data on their public web sites, as well as summary analyses of what the College has learned from these data. In addition, Augustana has developed an assessment instrument which is expected to be used by 100 members of the Annapolis Group, as an alternative to U.S. News ranking data.

Principles included in "New Leadership for Student Learning and Assessment", newly published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), reflect higher education's efforts to balance demands for public accountability with the institution's right to decide what to measure and how to do so. These principles are a good indicator of what, in a very short period of time, has become mainstream.



1. The primary responsibility for achieving excellence falls on colleges and universities themselves. Accrediting organizations have played a significant role in advancing the assessment of learning outcomes and must continue to do so while encouraging institutions to set the highest possible standards.

2. To that end, each college and university (and major divisions, schools, and programs within them) should develop ambitious, specific, and clearly stated goals for student learning appropriate to its mission, resources, tradition, student body, and community setting.

3. Each college and university should gather evidence about how well students in various programs are achieving learning goals across the curriculum and about the ability of its graduates to succeed in a challenging and rapidly changing world. The evidence gathered through this process should be used by each institution and its faculty to develop coherent, effective strategies for educational improvement.

4. Each college and university should provide information about its basic characteristics, clearly communicate its educational mission, and describe its strategies for achieving its educational goals and their effectiveness. In addition to basic data about an institution, students and others should have access to an easily intelligible summary of conclusions drawn from evidence about student learning and a clear description of the process of continuous improvement on a campus.

Implications for St. Norbert College

What do these trends in assessment mean for St. Norbert College? At the very least, they point to the following.

- We can expect the level of scrutiny received during the HLC Focused Visit to be repeated in 2011, our next full site visit.
- In the near future, we will have to make decisions about what assessment data to share publicly and how best to communicate these data to the public.
- We will probably have to decide whether to join the growing ranks of Colleges and Universities that have adopted a standardized measure (in addition to local measures) of student learning such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) or the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP).
- And, if standardized measures are adopted, we'll have to strategize how to ensure that students respond to them seriously in order to obtain accurate, valid results.

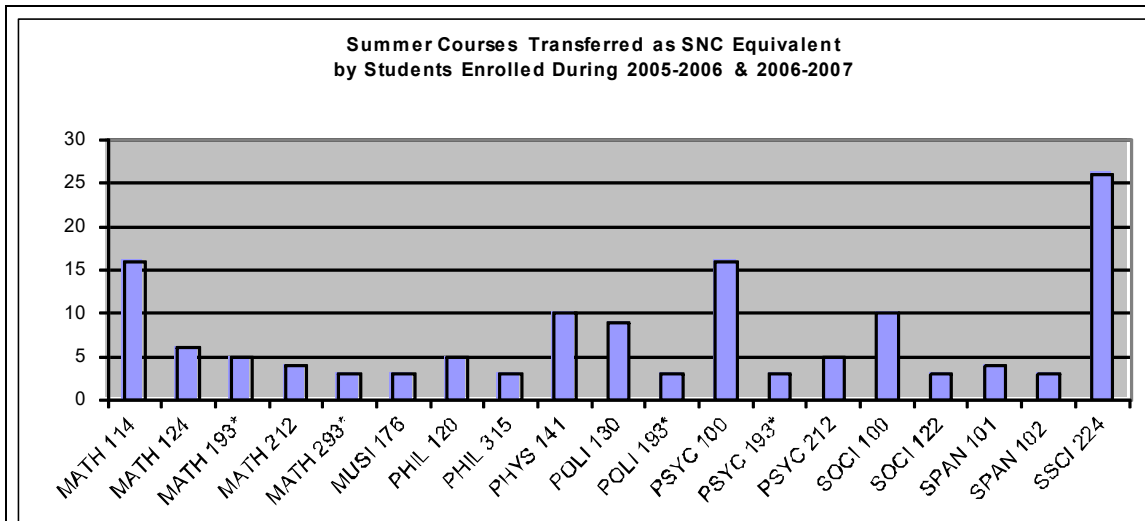
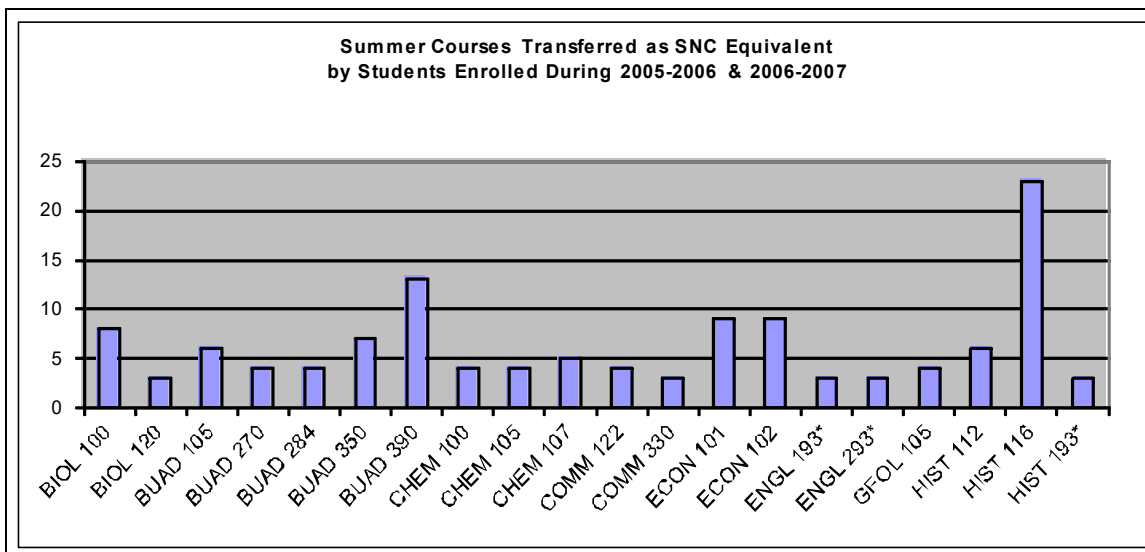
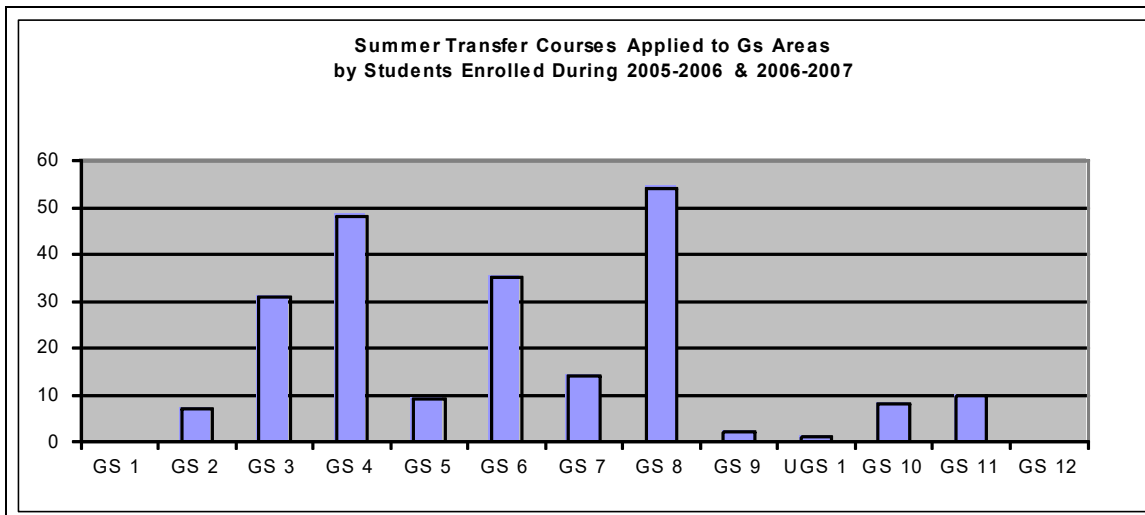
What Can We Conclude?

Assessment isn't just an accreditation issue anymore. It will increasingly influence our ability to attract qualified students and will have a significant impact on our reputation among peer institutions. Internally, our continued efforts to provide academic disciplines and the College as a whole with useful and valid measures of student learning outcomes will continue to enhance the quality of an SNC education.

Assessment isn't going away anytime soon. And that can well be viewed as a good thing.

Something to Think About...

Four hundred courses taken at various regional colleges and universities during the summer were transferred to St. Norbert College for credit during the 2002-2005 academic years. Totalling 1468 credits, these course transfers represent \$348,650 in lost revenue. While there are many legitimate reasons for students to take courses off campus, discussions about alternative ways to deliver needed courses could help recover some of this revenue as well as ensure appropriate rigor. The three charts below show the number of courses transferred for general education credit and SNC major equivalents for courses transferred at least 3 times during this period.



*Courses ending in "93" are a stand in for various electives applied to the students' major.