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INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Volume 4, Issue 6

May 6, 2005

ASSESSMENT NEWS

Editor's Note: The March 31, 2005 issue of Assessment News highlighted data showing gender differences on mission-related attitudes for students entering St. Norbert College. Our sixth and final issue for the 2004-2005 academic year offers one final perspective on these data.

Athletics Helps Bridge the Gap

by Tim Bald, Athletic Director

The data presented in the last issue of Assessment News show that male students entering St. Norbert College hold views less congruent with the College mission statement than their female peers. They are, for example, less often attracted to the College's religious orientation, less predisposed to participate in volunteer or community service, less inclined to socialize with another racial/ethnic group, and less likely to regard helping others as essential or very important. Because about one third of SNC males participate in interscholastic sports, athletics is uniquely positioned to help bridge this gap.

Athletes not only have an academic advisor, but a mentor as well. Coaches establish expectations for study time and academic performance. Student athletes are encouraged to develop (and quickly learn) good time management skills. Signs in the locker room are the most tangible evidence that academics are important. Some of the signs read:

"Did you go to all your classes today?"
"Are you prepared for your next test?"
"Did you spend enough time studying today?"
"If you can't answer all these questions in the affirmative, then you have failed today."

The athletic department receives copies of any academic warnings issued to student athletes. The appropriate coaches are notified and expected to follow-up with the student, taking whatever action is appropriate. A student in academic jeopardy may be asked to sit out until the student's performance improves. In hockey, students submit regular (Continued on Page 2)

Impressions of 11th Annual Catholic College and University Forum for Institutional Research at Villanova University

by Dr. Jack Williamsen
OIE Data Analyst/Retention Coordinator

The *Catholic Higher Education Cooperative (CHERC)* sponsors an annual conference at Villanova, one of the 'founding' institutions of CHERC. Next year, however, DePaul will host the meeting in Chicago. This change is associated with other changes in the organization. Until quite recently, CHERC's membership appeared to be largely (but not exclusively) Catholic higher education institutions in the "northeast corridor," within a few hours commute of Villanova. The move to Chicago represents one step among others (e.g., the website moved from Villanova's web page to its own page, www.cherc.org) intended to expand the membership (and, hopefully, the impact) of CHERC. The organization now has about 54 institutional members and began to charge annual dues last year.

As can be seen from the *Forum* title, the attendees are, for the most part, heads or members of IR departments at Catholic universities and colleges. My impression from this meeting is that this group, however, is not just interested in "number crunching." The two main speakers at this year's forum gave theoretical/historical presentations on some general facets of higher education. This was by design, as far as I could tell, and seemed intended to "broaden" members' knowledge of issues in higher education, especially as they affect Catholic colleges.

Another impression from this year's forum is that the group has a strong interest in factors associated with the Catholic identity and missions of their institutions. The topic of "mission" was big this year in the research presentations, as was the search to identify what makes a Catholic institution of higher education "Catholic." Because the group is (Continued on Page 2)

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Assessment Conference Possibilities

Association for Institutional Research, 2005 Forum, Mission: Improve Higher Education, May 29-June 1, 2005, San Diego, CA.

The First International Conference on Enhancing Teaching and Learning through Assessment, June 13-15, 2005, Hong Kong.

Association of American Colleges & Universities 5th Annual Greater Expectations Institute, Campus Leadership for Student Engagement, Inclusion, and Achievement, June 22-26, 2005, Burlington, Vermont.

National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, Summer Institute on First-Year Assessment "Aspiring to Excellence", July 24-26, 2005, Renaissance Asheville Hotel, Asheville, North Carolina.

Association for Institutional Research, Foundations for the Practice of Institutional Research Institute: 2005, August 5-9, 2005 Bridgewater State College, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Athletics Helps Bridge the Gap

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progress reports signed by faculty. Coaches are evaluated in part on their commitment to students' academic performance. The fact that proportionately fewer student athletes are dismissed or placed on probation than the general population is strong evidence that the effort the athletic department invests in promoting academic performance is paying off.

Participation in service opportunities across campus are encouraged and accommodated (e.g. scheduling of practices) by athletics. Most student athletes participate in some service project through their residence or LSI, but for those who don't, every sport is expected to undertake at least one service project. As a result, every athlete has participated in at least one service project each year. "Athletes for Life" conceived and organized by two student athletes (Aaron Faulkner and Heather Henri) is a new program which integrates spirituality, service, and sport. "Athletes for Life" offers opportunities for bible studies and helps identify possible service projects for student athletes.

Athletics also supports the mission's call to "embrace a diversity of persons, perspectives, and cultures" by helping to recruit a diverse student body, by employing coaches of color, and most importantly, by promoting cooperation and understanding through teamwork. The College's retention efforts are enhanced by the fact that student athletes have an automatic support system and peers with similar interests and experiences when they arrive on campus in addition to contact with upper classmen who have successfully balanced academics and athletics.

Higher Learning Commission Focussed Visit March 6-7, 2006



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Impressions of 11th Annual Catholic College and University Forum for Institutional Research at Villanova University (Continued from Page 1)

comprised of IR folks, their main bread-and-butter contributions to the dialogs about mission and identity are statistical analyses of (primarily) survey data from the usual suspects (CIRP, CSS, NSSE) and, to a lesser extent, institution-developed instruments.

My impression is that CHERC is further along on this task than the more recent one of increased responsibility and involvement in learning outcomes assessment, a movement apparently stimulated by accreditation association directives. The IR folks are at a disadvantage here, since they typically are intended to be responsive to higher administration needs for data. Thus, they have not developed strong relationships with either faculty or student affairs persons, a factor that places them at the periphery of the core groups accrediting associations hold responsible for assessment of student learning outcomes.

I suspect there is an additional factor helping to frustrate IR contributions to learning outcomes assessment. There seems to be little in the training and education of institutional researchers that provides them with any recognized expertise on either learning or on the assessment of learning, whether that learning comes through the curriculum (faculty) or the cocurriculum (student affairs). As a result of the above two factors (lack of professional relationships with core groups, lack of perceived expertise), CHERC members spend most of their time doing one of the things they do best—analyzing survey data or other "indirect" measures of learning. Thus far, that seems to be the primary contribution to institutional efforts at outcomes assessment. IR persons also attempt to make themselves relevant by offering themselves as technical (usually statistical) consultants to others within the institution attempting to assess learning outcomes. I am unclear how successful this is.

So, what might be the benefit of CHERC to St. Norbert (and vice versa)? At this point, I believe CHERC's ongoing interest in clarifying and defining what Catholicity means to Catholic institutions is of relevance to us, since we are concerned with the same matters. It's nice to be among friends and see what is being done on this topic at other institutions with whom we share a similar identity.

St. Norbert, in turn, can provide some help to CHERC on the general topic of learning outcomes assessment. Because of the OIE's origin and initial staffing, we have a big headstart on most CHERC members when it comes to this topic and can at least show them what we have done, and how we have done it. The hope would be some of our efforts might be applicable to the needs and circumstances of other CHERC members and be of help to them.

Lastly, to the extent that my analysis above is correct, there is a lesson for the OIE. As we expand from learning outcomes assessment to IR data gurus we should be careful to maintain strong links to our original constituencies, namely, academic and student affairs, and to our original purposes. If we drift too far away, captured by the gravitational pull of administrative demands for IR kinds of data, we risk the marginalization that seems to be the lot of institutional researchers. Because of the OIE's recognized leadership in outcomes assessment, this marginalization could spell the erosion of whatever progress we have made in creating a 'culture of assessment.'