Like most institutions of higher learning, St. Norbert College (SNC) has a mission statement which commits the College to promoting certain affective outcomes. For example, the SNC mission aspires to have graduates who a) embrace a diversity of persons, perspectives and cultures, b) engage in service in response to the particular needs of people throughout the world, and c) promote social justice and the common good. To this end, St. Norbert College offers an array of curricular and co-curricular programs intended to foster these outcomes.

Assessment of student learning as a requirement for accreditation has obligated institutions of higher learning to investigate whether they are successful in achieving affective outcomes. Best practices in assessment suggest the use of multiple measures and multiple sources of evidence. Efforts to measure the College’s effectiveness in promoting mission outcomes are currently underway at St. Norbert College. Our work on self-worth (the subject of our poster presentation) is the most advanced. SNC has developed internal survey items closely aligned with all mission outcomes and has begun to explore ways to generate direct evidence.

This handout summarizes an associated investigation of whether SNC is achieving its mission-based affective outcomes and whether changes in mission-related student responses can be tied to campus programming. Three items from the HERI CIRP and Current Student Survey (Helping Others in Difficulty, Influencing the Political Structure, Helping to Promote Racial Understanding) have been selected for this analysis because they most closely reflect the SNC mission outcomes identified above.

Values of Students Entering St. Norbert College

Students enter the College with views that are more or less congruent with mission-related outcomes. For example, about two-thirds of entering students regard “Helping Others in Difficulty” as very important or essential, but less than one-third regard “Helping to Promote Racial Understanding” and “Influencing the Political Structure” as very important or essential. In addition, entering students’ views of the importance of these goals differ by gender, with males rating each item as less important than their female peers. Trend data beginning in 1971 show that these are longstanding patterns. In other words, there is important work to be done.
Values of Students at Graduation

A possible first indication of whether the College is achieving its mission-based outcomes is whether more students regard these items as very important or essential upon graduation than at entry. That is, do students’ ratings change in the direction the College intends? In the case of these three outcomes, the answer for the combined classes of 2000-2004 appears to be yes. An additional 10% of the sample rated “Helping Others in Difficulty” as very important or essential as seniors (true for both males and females) and an additional 5% rated “Influencing the Political Structure” as very important or essential as seniors, although the total percent of students who regard this item as very important or essential remained quite low. For “Promote Racial Understanding”, an additional 5% of males and about 3.5% of females rated this item as very important or essential, although the total never exceeded 30%.

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The freshmen percentages in these tables differ from the tables above because the freshmen-senior sample includes only those students from the graduating classes of 2000-2004 who completed both instruments.
Because developmental changes during young adulthood may occur regardless of college experience, the magnitude of change and, in two cases, the total percent who regard the goal as very important or essential would seem to offer less than compelling evidence that the College is achieving its affective objectives. Nevertheless, it is reassuring to note that the direction of the change is consistent with the College’s aspirations. That our internal instrument offers stronger evidence of a college effect (see Figure below) may be attributable to the fact that the local items more closely reflect the mission objectives. Furthermore, it should be noted that not all students are exposed to those curricular and co-curricular initiatives designed to promote selected mission outcomes. Assessment of specific programs intended to help students achieve mission outcomes will provide additional evidence of the College’s effectiveness.

The Four Personal Sphere Developmental Goals

Finally, ratings from the 2004 HERI CSS national sample suggest that attitudes toward politics, racial understanding, and helping others may be difficult to change in a short span of four years. While fewer SNC students from the last five graduating classes rate these items very important or essential compared to students in all other 4 year private colleges, the differences are relatively small. In the case of influencing the political structure and promoting racial understanding, none of us, it appears, are doing all that well.

A Closer Look at How Students Change

Over a four-year time span, not all students change in the intended direction. On a four-point scale, a change of one level could indicate real change or simply be measurement error. Cross-tabs of students’ responses as freshmen and seniors afford more precise analysis of how students changed. For each of the three target variables, roughly half of the sample gave the same rating as freshmen and again as seniors. For “Influencing the Political Structure”, 30% rated the item higher and 23% rated the item lower (although virtually all the decline was one scale level). For “Helping Others in Difficulty”, 33% gave the item a higher rating as seniors, 21% lower. For “Promoting Racial Understanding”, 34% of the sample gave the item a higher rating, 21% lower. In general, more students ascribed greater importance to each item as seniors than lesser importance.
We can drill down even deeper. 52% of freshmen who said “Helping Others in Difficulty” was not important rated this item as somewhat important as seniors, while an additional 39% rated the item as very important or essential. Only 9% of this group continued to rate the item not important. Lower ratings for those who as freshmen rated this item very important or essential occurred, but were of a smaller magnitude (e.g. only 7% of students originally rating the item essential gave a senior rating of somewhat important). Similar patterns were evident for “Promoting Racial Understanding”, although a higher percentage of those giving high ratings as freshmen gave lower rating as seniors than for helping others. For “Influencing the Political Structure”, no clear pattern emerges.

Do Activities Promote Mission Outcomes?

The HERI surveys also include items which can be used to investigate whether any relationship exists between mission outcomes and categories of activities (e.g., “Performed Volunteer Service”, “Attended a Racial Awareness Workshop”, “Discussed Politics”) that might reasonably be expected to help foster those outcomes. Is there any evidence that students who change most are more often participating in related activities than those who change least?

In regard to “Influencing the Political Structure”, students who said they voted in a student election, discussed politics frequently, or participated in student government more often gave this item a higher rating as seniors than those who did not. More students who attended a cultural awareness workshop or socialized with someone of a different race/ethnicity gave “Promoting Racial Understanding” a higher rating as seniors than those who did not. Somewhat surprisingly, changes in senior ratings of the importance of “Helping Others in Difficulty” does not appear to depend on whether students had performed volunteer work, discussed politics, or tutored another student. This finding could be attributed to the high social desirability of the item or the fact that 82% of seniors reported performing volunteer service, some of which was obligatory for participation in a social group or an athletic team.

Conclusion

What, if anything, can we learned from this exploratory analysis? First, assessment of affective outcomes is complex and challenging. It will take some time for the assessment and institutional research communities to develop reliable methods for assessing affective outcomes. Second, this analysis underscores the importance of using multiple measures and multiple data sources. These data both support and challenge our more robust (and more positive) internal findings. It is reassuring to discover that the direction of change is consistent with our internal data and to find that students who participate in certain activities are more often impacted positively than those who do not. However, like most exploratory analyses, we are left with more questions than answers. What is the magnitude of impact an institution of higher learning can reasonably expect? What is success? Are there, in fact, different standards for success? When exposed to the same environment, why do some students change in the intended direction, while others do not? Is an institution that successfully promotes affective development, but not to a level observed nationally, really successful?

All chi squares are significant at <.02.