Broadly-stated affective student learning outcomes frequently have a central role in institutional Mission Statements. However, they are viewed by some as virtually impossible to define, quantify, and assess because the outcomes are vaguely stated and without easily identifiable and measurable behavioral markers. We believe, however, we have found a promising approach to the assessment of mission-derived affective outcomes.

Our first step is to reconceptualize the assessment of such outcomes as a problem in construct validation. As constructs, affective outcomes are akin to personality variables (traits, attitudes, emotions) long-studied in psychology, psychometrics, and related fields. Borrowing well-established approaches to the validation of personality constructs and using these approaches to validate affective outcomes, we can make progress in the assessment of those student learning outcomes often seen as central to an institution’s core identity.

Our research demonstration uses the affective outcome of “Achieve a sense of Self-Worth” as an example, perhaps one of the more seemingly-intangible affective outcomes to be found in a mission statement. We obtained student responses from a variety of surveys (including St. Norbert’s own Current Student Survey, and the CIRP and College Student Survey from HERI)\(^1\) and combined them with focus group comments in a systematic way to (1) demonstrate that students moving from freshman to senior year increasingly report the College helps them achieve this goal and (2) show that students can define what “self-worth” means to them and report ways the College is helpful in this regard.

With this information in hand, we enriched our conceptual understanding of self-worth by correlating it with other student self-rated personal attributes from the HERI surveys. Our findings indicate that “self-worth” is highly associated with self-rated personal variables such as self-understanding, clear personal goals, and emotional health. Self-Worth was not linked to narrow academic or cognitive skills, such as mathematical ability, or to overall “academic ability.” It was only modestly correlated with attributes such as “popularity” and “understanding of others.”

The personal nature of self-worth persisted through the undergraduate experience. Our seniors provided virtually the same rank order of personal attributes as did the freshmen, suggesting that the early emphasis on personal dimensions of self-worth was not affected by four years in an academic environment where intellectual achievements are prized and rewarded.

---

\(^1\) “Achieving a Sense of Self-Worth” and “self-worth” are not included as standard items on the HERI surveys. We used their optional “Additional Questions” sections to include our own items related to “self-worth”
In focus groups our students identified a number of ways the College supported increased self-worth. Generally speaking, a variety of different opportunities for interaction with peers and with faculty were cited as helpful. We hypothesized, therefore, that seniors rating their change in self-worth from freshman to senior year as strong would differ from peers with lower change ratings on such variables as (1) satisfaction with peer and faculty interactions, (2) amount of time spent with other students, and (3) how helpful and supportive faculty were.

Our data were supportive of the hypotheses. In all cases, seniors reporting the greatest increase in self-worth (about 25% of our sample) were more satisfied and reported more—and more supportive contacts—with peers and faculty than did the lowest ranking quarter of our sample.

Given the personal nature of self-worth as understood and defined by our students, we were concerned that it might suggest a self-absorption inconsistent with social and civic responsibility. However, that turns out not to be the case. A greater proportion of high self-worth students indicated that such goals as Become a community leader, Promote racial understanding,” and Help others in difficulty were “very important” or “essential” than did the seniors ranking lowest on self-worth. A greater proportion of high self-worth students indicated they would do volunteer work after graduation as well.

We believe the approach illustrated in our work on “self-worth” represents a flexible, practically-useful way to address some of the problems associated with affective outcome assessment. However, our illustration is incomplete in a number of ways. For example, we have not yet demonstrated causal relationships between student experiences in the curriculum and cocurriculum and self-worth. Nor have we explored the impact of interactions between these experiences and such student characteristics as gender, race, and prior academic achievement on the outcome of self-worth—a very useful step in designing targeted interventions intended to enhance this affective learning outcome.

Affective outcomes are not only difficult to define, they are likely to be quite complex in nature. So it is not surprising that the progress we have made in the assessment of achieving a sense of self-worth, however promising, does not bring us to final conclusions. That is the nature of the construct validation enterprise.2

Jack Williamsen, St. Norbert College
(jack.williamsen@snc.edu)  
Robert Rutter, St. Norbert College
(bob.rutter@snc.edu)

---

2 A comprehensive report detailing our research on four mission-based affective outcomes can be downloaded from www.snc.edu/oie/. Click on “Resources” > “Public Access Documents” and select “Student Learning Outcomes: The Personal Sphere.”