

THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (NSSE) ACTION TEAM:

FACILITATORS: CHUCK HUGHES & PAT LA GROW

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Opportunities for Improvement Report

Introduction

The present document is an evaluation of the root causes of results from the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) regarding students at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO). The document also contains suggested Opportunities for Improvement (OFIs) to address those root causes. The evaluation was performed by the NSSE Action Team on assignment by the Continuous Improvement Team.

The National Survey of Student Engagement is an assessment instrument that is being used by colleges and universities across the country to determine the extent to which students (freshmen and seniors) engage in a variety of effective educational practices. The University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), now in its second year of administering the survey, scores below the average of other Master's granting institutions in the majority of NSSE items.

Report Design

The present document is organized into two sections. The first provides an overview of the meeting process of the team. The second contains the resulting OFIs the group agreed were most critical to the success of an overall quality improvement of the NSSE results.

The Process

Participants

The participants of the action team were selected for their knowledge and first-hand experience in working with students. They all served as full and contributing members and their expertise, suggestions and effort are sincerely and humbly recognized. We thank them for taking the time, expressing the interest, and being such positive contributing members.

- Dr. Donna Cobb, Dean's Council
- Dr. Warren Dickson, Faculty Senate
- Dr. Dan Donaldson, Academic Affairs Council
- Mr. Victor Hall, Adjunct Faculty, College of Mathematics & Science
- Ms. Karen Henderson, Director of Assessment
- Dr. Robert McGill, Assessment Advisory Board
- Dr. Cynthia Murray, Statistician & Faculty, College of Mathematics & Science
- Mr. Jarrod Noftsger, Director of First Year Program

The CIT asked Dr. Chuck Hughes and Dr. Pat LaGrow to act as facilitators for the NSSE Action Team. It was determined, by Chuck and Pat, that the first task was to review the 2003 NSSE results and then move into determining the root causes of the results.

The Action Team was formed to represent not only the areas indicated above, but to represent each of the five undergraduate colleges as well. At the first meeting of the group, background materials about the NSSE were provided, as well as the overall results for 2003. At the second meeting, the group utilized a Pareto approach to identify primary areas of concern. The group then worked through a cause-and-effect diagram with one area of concern to learn the process. At the next few meetings, the group created cause-and-effect (fishbone) diagrams to describe root causes for the NSSE results of most concern. The group then identified five root causes believed to contribute to the 2003 NSSE results. At the last two meetings, the group meshed the root causes into two root causes with corresponding recommendations (opportunities for improvement) and rationale. A final report of these suggestions will be delivered to the CIT and to Dr. Betz for consideration.

The Opportunities for Improvement

From the action team's meetings the following recommendations are offered in good faith as opportunities for improvement regarding areas of concern on the National Survey of Student Engagement.

Root Causes, Recommendations & Rationale

- 1. Many courses at UCO are not considered rigorous.** Students at UCO tend to prioritize work, family, and other activities ahead of their classes. In addition, a lack of rigor at the high school level leads students to similar expectations in college. To accommodate those situations many faculty have, out of necessity, lowered their expectations of student classroom performance (e.g. number and difficulty of both in-class and out-of-class assignments, rigor of exams, lack of comprehensive final exams).

Recommendations:

- 1a. The university should emphasize its expectation that faculty require an appropriate workload for the course level as mandated in OSRHE policy. Faculty will inform students of this expectation by including a statement on each syllabus that clearly states the amount of time students are expected to spend outside of class, as well as the type of work that is expected (e.g. reading, answering review questions, problem solving, writing).

- Rationale: This provides students a clear message of what is expected of them in a college-level course and establishes a university-wide standard for out-of-class expectations.

- 1b. The university should provide resources for academic departments to develop and offer out-of-class systems to support student success in more rigorous courses. Support systems might include:

Electronic support for communication such as instructor email, WebCT, tutorial software, etc.

Additional structured support such as help sessions, tutoring centers, upper-class mentors, additional classroom time, formal study groups, parallel study skill workshops, etc.

- Rationale: This will help establish a culture of support for student success. While expectations of classroom rigor can be raised, the original causes for the problem remain: the failure of students to devote sufficient time to out-of-class study. To address this, UCO students will require additional and, in some cases, nontraditional avenues to obtain support and feedback in their coursework.

- 1c. The university should provide an avenue for faculty to develop teaching strategies to address issues arising from the increase in classroom rigor recommended above, in addition to recurring issues of class size and limited preparation and grading time. The university should designate financial resources for teaching support programs. The need (including: methods, resources and projected cost to implement) for the teaching support programs should be included in department and college strategic plans for funding consideration. Support for some of these activities can be offered through current university outlets (e.g. Faculty Enhancement Center, websites). Activities might include:

Faculty enhancement opportunities such as faculty support groups, workshops, lunchtime seminars, web-based message boards on best practices in classroom management, etc.

Additional direct support such as web-based homework and quizzing sites, in-class student response systems, access to student assistants and/or graduate assistants, etc.

- Rationale: Requiring more work from students necessarily requires more time by faculty to support and evaluate this work. Because faculty workloads are already high (see root cause number 2 below), a balance of and support structure for teaching loads is critical in bringing about a systemic change. Without it, students may be required to do additional work but will not be held accountable for it.

- 1d. The university should make a greater effort in identifying and intervening with “at risk” students. This can be accomplished by having instructors submit mid-term (or possibly earlier) grades to students making a grade below a C. A report can be generated and forwarded to a student’s major department when the student is below average in two or more courses, which would allow the department to explore ways to improve student performance.

- Rationale: This will help prevent our students from becoming anonymously “lost in the crowd” and indicate to them that their success is important to both the faculty and the university.

- 2. The ability and motivation of faculty and staff to devote the time and energy necessary to engage students on a personal basis are waning.** This results from ever-increasing teaching loads (larger classes, more students per faculty member), service loads (more committees, more initiatives, community service), and expectations for scholarly/creative activities. Staff members are affected by the increase with a higher demand for support. Coupled with this expanding workload is a faculty and staff salary structure that fails to keep up with cost-of-living increases, a greater reliance on part-time faculty, and less competitive hiring pools.

Recommendations:

- 2a. The university should establish a two-track tenure/promotion/review system for faculty. Track One would focus on teaching and scholarly/creative activities, while Track Two

- would focus on teaching and service. By focusing non-teaching activities on a single area (either scholarly/creative activities or service), faculty members will be able to allot more time to teaching. More time would also be available to include students in service or scholarly/creative activities.
- Rationale: Faculty should see this as a mechanism to engage students more fully in the activities they do on a day-to-day basis.
- 2b. The university should investigate the possibility of capping enrollment to match the resources available at UCO. Currently class sizes are determined by the number of seats in a classroom. Ideally the optimal class size should be determined by the discipline and by the teaching methodologies employed.
- Rationale: Small class size has traditionally distinguished UCO from the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University. It is also one of the factors that college rating services use to identify the nation's best universities.
- 2c. The university should have clearly stated goals concerning faculty and staff salaries with clearly stated priorities (relative to other university initiatives) for attaining those goals.
- Rationale: Faculty and staff understand when budgets are tight. Acknowledging this and developing a long-range, high-priority plan to address the problem will bolster faculty and staff morale.
- 2d. The university should develop a salary structure for staff and adjuncts that recognizes and rewards experience, developed skills, and long-term commitment to the university. This has become more critical with staff in recent years as the technical training necessary to perform job functions (e.g. Banner training) is very specific to this university and the learning curve for new staff has become much steeper.
- Rationale: Greater recognition of the value of staff and part-time faculty by the university will bolster morale and make it more likely that individuals in these positions will “go the extra mile” for students.
- 2e. University-sponsored initiatives should emerge from the strategic plan which balances resources and priorities. Such a plan would ensure that initiatives follow from the mission and goals of the university. It should also provide mechanisms for tracking progress and performance.
- Rationale: This will provide credibility for the university strategic plan and prevent university-sponsored initiatives from being perceived as unrelated.

Overall Comments:

While some of the recommendations may not be immediately feasible, others are without financial cost to the university and would directly impact the faculty and students in a positive manner. For example, increasing expectations of students (Recommendation 1a) and establishing a two-track system for faculty (Recommendation 2a) could have far-reaching positive consequences and should be given serious consideration.