OVERVIEW SUMMARY COMMENTS

NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (NSSE)

Kevin Haertzen (Mathematics), Improvement of Learning Committee
George Smith (Fine Arts), Improvement of Learning Committee

Introduction

Local administration of the NSSE was administered electronically early in Spring 2004. By design this study surveys freshmen and seniors, rather than all students on campus.

Participation
Since NSSE was distributed electronically, participants “self-selected” themselves (i.e., they could not be “forced” to participate in this research). From a research design perspective, such participation might raise concerns about experiential and attitudinal differences among participants and non-participants (i.e., do they differ statistically?).

The Nature of the Survey Data
Most of the data in this survey are nominal in form—i.e., categorical in description (rather than continuous or ratio-based values). Therefore, consideration of averages may not be meaningful. But the statistical significance of directional trends indicated by such data may be meaningful.

While all issues covered in this study might be of concern, the present overview has attempted to identify only those items where a statistically significant difference of .001 existed. Many additional data were less significant (at .05 or .01 levels), but these items were reviewed only superficially for this summary in favor of those items deemed “more important” because of their statistical significance.

Bases For Comparison
Averages for UW-Platteville were calculated for the NSSE. Comparisons and levels of statistical significance were also presented for the UW System campuses (excluding UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee), for other “cluster institutions” offering master’s degrees, and for the overall national data. Campus administration asked that we limit comparisons to data from other UWS campuses rather than with “all” schools.
This in-state perspective seems a more reasonable basis for comparisons—for us and for HLC, who’ll be potentially reviewing these data—since we generally draw from the same population of students.

Which Data Should We Be Concerned About?
Identifying or analyzing items that reflected “statistical significance” has limited importance, given the nature of nominal data. For example, even if “statistical significance” suggests that UWP differs from other UW campuses, we need to focus on specific areas of “concern.” If UWP’s overall rating on a five-point scale for a particular item is greater than 4, then we’re still doing a pretty good job. This would be of less concern than, say, an item where we’re not as “significant” (e.g., at .01 level) but where all UW campuses are not doing well—i.e., System average is 2.2 on a scale of 5).

Freshmen vs. Seniors
NSSE surveyed two clusters of students—freshmen and seniors. Since freshmen had only a few months’ exposure to our campus, we might argue that their experiences may not be as important as those of our seniors, who’ve spent 4-5 years here. What is not identified in the data is whether seniors have spent their entire academic careers at UWP; traditionally one third of our graduates began college elsewhere, and then transfer to UWP. Therefore, even though NSSE asks specifically about local experiences, it is possible that respondents’ perspectives were colored by other non-UWP experiences.

A significant concern in comparing responses between freshmen and seniors is that the gender distribution on our campus is skewed more than distributions on other UWS campuses. Traditionally we’ve maintained a gender distribution of roughly two-thirds male, one third female. We could analyze data within each gender, but that would affect statistical significance (which is what we’ve based the present analysis on). It is possible to make gender adjustments to accommodate these discrepancies.

However, the gender distribution among senior participants was very close to the actual distribution among UWP seniors in Spring 2004. Fifty-seven percent of the senior participants were male, compared to the senior population that was 58% male.¹ (Females represented 43% of the participants, and 42% of the campus senior population.)

¹ Campus enrollment data supplied by A. Nelson, Institutional Research.
Gender distribution for freshmen participants would have very likely resulted in skewed data. Campus freshman population was 64% male, 36% female at the time of NSSE administration. Actual NSSE participation levels were 48% male, 52% female. So the participant distribution was probably not representative of the campus freshman population. (Fall 2004 enrollment data—for the semester following NSSE administration—was 66% male, 34% female ... similar to our perception of UWP’s “traditional” gender distribution.)

The issues of limited freshmen experience and participant gender perhaps limit the usefulness of this portion of NSSE data. In spite of this caveat, statistically significant trends may be seen when freshman and senior data are compared. For example, a low level of racial or ethnic awareness among freshmen may not be improved over time, as reflected in the more reliable senior data. Or perhaps some problems become worse over time.

Report Organization
The body of this report has been organized to identify and analyze those data determined to be statistically significant among UWP seniors. Where applicable, discussion of relevant freshman responses has been included. Thirteen general areas of NSSE inquiry are identified below; some included few sub-categories, while others included nearly two dozen sub-categories.

1. Academic and Intellectual Experiences
2. Mental Activities
3. Examinations
4. Reading and Writing
5. Problem Sets
6. Additional Collegiate Experiences
7. Enriching Educational Experiences
8. Quality of Relationships
9. Time Usage
10. Institutional Environment
11. Educational and Personal Growth
12. Academic Advising
13. Satisfaction

Based on the senior responses, the conclusion of this report identifies statistically significant data, in comparison with other UW campuses. Considering these to be either “strengths” or “weaknesses,” however, may be inappropriate. It is also important to understand that many of the practices or experiences studied in NSSE are not within the control of the campus administration or faculty, but rather reflect the nature of campus life in Spring 2004 when the survey was administered.
Conclusion
This data provide a “snapshot” of student attitudes and perceptions, i.e., the NSSE data provide us with a perspective “at this point in time.” It is important to not misinterpret these data or to overreact, based on a single year’s report. It is particularly important to not jump to unfounded conclusions as we approach our accreditation visit by the Higher Learning Commission (Fall 2006).

Longitudinal interpretation—“benchmarking”—may provide better insight and more reliable perspectives over time. NSSE data provide one perspective. Focus groups and other locally generated data would provide other perspectives—perhaps consistent, but perhaps not. Given the nature of NSSE data (much of it nominal), probing locally to understand “why” and “how” may prove more insightful into how UWP actually engages its students on short- and long-term bases.