

UAF NSSE Survey Committee Recommendations

April 23, 2008

Executive Summary

During the spring semester 2007, 536 UAF students (211 freshmen and 325 seniors) completed the National Survey on Student Engagement. Respondents well represented UAF's students in ethnicity, on- and off-campus residence, and transfer students. However, respondent rates did not well match well in the areas of gender (67% female; such differences in response rates among groups are common for NSSE surveys nationally), full- (81%) or part-time, or traditional versus non-traditional age groups (71% age < 24). The results, synthesized by the Center for Post Secondary Research at Indiana University, reflect student opinion of UAF in the following areas: Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Supportive Campus Environment. In the Fall 2007, a committee of students, faculty, staff, and administrators gathered to review the results and make recommendations.

The committee made the following observations on the data:

Academic Challenge:

NSSE data indicate that students responding to the survey believe the academic challenge at UAF is less than at peer institutions. In particular, the student data suggests that more emphasis should be placed upon thinking critically and effectively (reducing memorization); using computing and information technology; synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, and experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships; making judgments about the value of information, arguments, and methods and soundness of conclusions; applying theories or concepts to practical problems or new situations; and learning something that changes the way students understand an issue or concept. In addition, students report widely varying classroom experiences, ranging from feeling that there is little academic challenge in any class, to feeling that freshman-level courses are altogether too difficult/demanding, to experiencing frustration with instructors' teaching styles/abilities. Freshman and seniors also perceive that writing clearly and effectively and thinking critically and analytically is a lower priority at UAF than at comparable institutions. Finally, students perceive that UAF places a lower priority on

learning on their own, understanding themselves, understanding people of other backgrounds, and developing a personal code of values and ethics than do students at comparable institutions.

Active and Collaborative Learning:

Compared to peer institutions, students at UAF reported significantly lower rates of working together on projects during and outside of class. They also reported lower rates of including diverse perspectives in class discussions or writing assignments and of encouraging students of different backgrounds to have serious conversations about their perspectives on issues. Students reported rarely participating in community-based projects as part of a class.

Student-Faculty Interaction:

Student responses, primarily in the written comments section, indicate that advising at UAF needs attention. Both senior and freshman responses suggest that students perceive advising to be inconsistent, with students reporting both very good and poor advising experiences.

Supportive Campus Environment:

According to demographic data in the report, a significantly higher proportion of UAF students are working, going to school part-time, and have dependent care issues than students at peer institutions. Students over the age of 24 and students attending less than full time make up a higher percentage of our student body than at comparable institutions. Furthermore, a significantly higher number of students at UAF work for pay off campus and care for dependents than do students at other comparable students. All of these factors have been linked to non-retention and lack of student success.

Committee concerns about NSSE:

This was the first year that the NSSE survey was administered to UAF Students, and the committee raised some concerns about the data. Committee members felt that the survey was not delivered to students in a truly random manner and that delivering the survey on line may have discouraged non-traditional, non-technological students and may have filtered students who are not normally active participants in University life. The committee also questioned the value

of making policy statements on the basis of student opinion. In some cases, it seemed to the members of the committee that student perception and faculty/staff perception of situations differed greatly, and that the need to communicate rather than the need to change policy is called for.

Recommendations:

On the basis of the data in the NSSE report, the committee makes the following short-term and long-term recommendations.

Academic Challenge:

Short term—

- 1.** Encourage faculty to communicate the intent of the Core by including and emphasizing the purpose of the Core in their syllabus using a statement such as “The Core provides students with a shared foundation of skills and knowledge that, when combined with specialized study in the major and other specific degree requirements, prepares students to better meet the demands of life in the 21st century.”

- 2.** In the next year, have a working group review, strengthen, and clarify the philosophy of the Core and make this philosophy clear to students and faculty. Review and suggest revisions for the Core curriculum to raise the level of academic challenge generally but especially for freshmen classes. We recommend that this working group take the following steps:
 - A.** Gather needed information to make a competent assessment of the Core’s status;

 - B.** Evaluate and synthesize this information, including multiple student representatives throughout the process; and

 - C.** Encourage faculty to challenge students in the following areas:
 - i.** Learning something that changes the way they understand an issue or concept;

 - ii.** Thinking critically and effectively, reducing memorization tasks;

 - iii.** Analyzing basic elements of ideas, experiences, or theory—examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components;

iv. Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information and experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships;

v. Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, and methods and the soundness of conclusions;

vi. Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations; and

vii. Using computing and information technology.

Long Term--

1. Revitalize the Core, implementing a modernized and revitalized baccalaureate core curriculum that provides greater academic challenge ensuring:

A. Consistency and continuity in the academic challenge of Core classes, especially in 100-level classes;

B. Clearly communicated guiding philosophies (including the Perspectives on the Human Condition);

C. Standards of written expression, specifying articulation between freshman/sophomore writing classes and other Core classes, and strengthening standards for W and O classes—writing across the curriculum;

- A.** Encouraging faculty to evaluate their pedagogy;
- B.** Providing training and incentives for faculty who include teaching methods that take into account different learning styles such as visual, kinesthetic, and auditory;
- C.** Encouraging increased use of faculty development opportunities to ensure that best practices and multiple learning styles are being adequately addressed in teaching methods, especially in gateway classes;
- D.** In gateway classes, promoting active learning (moving away from the teacher transmission method) through diverse teaching methods which will enhance student engagement;
- E.** Promoting learning communities or study groups;
- F.** Developing freshman seminars that bring together our diverse student populations around topics of mutual interest; and
- G.**

company to build and operate an on-campus day care which covers students as well as faculty and staff;

3. Implement learning communities that integrate curricular and co-curricular activities for both on campus and off campus students. Recognize and reward faculty who advise student clubs and organizations.