

Qualitative Analyses of Student Comments from the 2009-10 and 2010-11 Hilbert College NSSE: Results from a Class Assignment for a Research Methods Course

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The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an annual survey of first-year and senior college students at four-year institutions measuring students' self-reported participation in educational activities that prior research has associated with high levels of learning and development. The survey is administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research in cooperation with the Indiana Center for Survey Research. Hilbert College has participated annually in the NSSE beginning in the spring of 2009 through the spring of 2012 as part of a Title III grant to aid in bolstering student success. The first administration of the survey was conducted locally with a paper version distributed nonrandomly to classes with large numbers of first-year students or seniors. Since then Hilbert has used the web+ mode which draws a random sample from the population of freshmen and seniors who are then invited to participate by email at their student email addresses beginning relatively early in the spring semester. Follow-up invitations continue throughout the semester including a final mailed paper version to nonresponders.

Typically the analyses of NSSE data have been conducted on the quantitative response to its survey items with little attention paid to students' responses to the open-ended question at the end of the NSSE survey, "Do you have any other comments?" (Chamber, 2010).

During the spring 2012 semester an instructor of one of the sections of Hilbert College's Research Methods in Social Sciences course (CJ/HS/PSY 305) contacted the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment with a request for help in locating qualitative data that might be used for a class assignment in coding. This presented an opportunity not only to take a look back at student comments collected on previous administrations of the NSSE but also to get a 'student perspective' on these comments.

A total of 202 students had responded to Hilbert College's 2009-10 and 2010-11 NSSE for a combined response rate over the two years of 29%. Of these responders, 26 or 13% had included comments. Thirteen comments came from first-year students and 13 from seniors. Of the freshmen 10 were female and all 13 were attending full-time. Of the seniors, 10 were female with 6 of these women attending part-time. All three male seniors offering comments were full-time students. After reviewing

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the comments to make sure that no personally identifying information was included, they were provided to the instructor of the research methods course for use with her class assignment. The comments were accompanied by information as to the level of the student (freshman or senior), gender, and full-time versus part-time.

After student in the class had completed their reports the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment was invited to provide a presentation on the NSSE. During this presentation the students engaged in a lively discussion of their findings from the qualitative analyses of comments and how their results compared to those from the quantitative analyses. At the conclusion of the semester the course instructor provided copies of the student's reports on their qualitative analyses. Analyses and conclusions from four of those student reports are presented below.

Results

By far the most common theme that the students reported was in the differences between comments from freshmen and senior. Mostly, according to the student researchers, these differences appeared to reflect differing levels of maturity and expectations. One student report noted,

My overall interpretation of this data is that the freshmen are young and aren't really positive on what they want out of college or what they want to do with their lives. The seniors on the other hand have a maturity about them and feel that Hilbert has offered the right courses and the right education needed to have a wonderful experience. I think the freshmen might think differently once they have a year or two of college under them.

On the same freshmen versus senior theme another of the student researchers noted that comments by freshmen were more focused on immediate reactions to courses they liked or did not like while for seniors, the comments and suggestions were somewhat more future-oriented on how well certain course offerings or lack of prepared them for careers. A third student report speculated that living on campus, which is more likely for freshmen than seniors might be an important factor in the noted differences.

One other thing that can play a role is many freshmen live on campus so they worry more about the facilities such as the gym and campus center compared to seniors who may no longer live on campus and don't use those facilities.

A second theme that emerged in the class analyses of NSSE comments was that of differing perceptions between traditional versus non-traditional students. Traditional versus non-traditional status is most often defined in terms of age. The traditional student is one who attends college straight out of high school, while the non-traditional student returns to her or his education after having had other experiences after high school such as working or starting a family. While traditional or non-traditional status was not directly reported for the NSSE comments, it was apparently possible to make

some inferences based on the information provided in the content. So as another of the student researchers noted,

... non-traditional students were left wanting more here at Hilbert. The students say things like "It was hard to integrate into activities," ... "I have been unable to take full advantage of the social and extracurricular programs and events.."

After citing several comments to make the point about the differences noted between traditional and non-traditional perceptions, While noting that non-traditional students also tend to be seniors, this student researcher concluded,

These comments from the students show that the non-traditional students here at Hilbert are looking for more out of the campus. While they are pleased with the education and staff, they want more to do. It seems as though they feel they are missing out on the college atmosphere/experience because they (sic) college is making it hard for those things to be available for them.

His class report goes on to make suggestions such as fostering activities and clubs that meet during weekday 10:00am to 3:00pm hours or early morning on weekends to accommodate non-traditional students who often have evening and weekend work schedules.

CONCLUSIONS

These qualitative analyses were submitted as part of class assignment and may not have strictly followed procedures of content analysis (e.g., Krippendorff, 1980). Still, the student researchers' reports were true to the spirit of phenomenological inquiry (Patton, 1990) focusing on distilling the essential themes in the experiences of their peers. As such their insights are worthwhile and can offer lessons to faculty, staff and administrators of the college.

One such lesson came about in the process of engaging the students in this research class in the process of understanding the data from the NSSE. Too often the analysis of the NSSE is restricted to a small handful of specialists and the conclusions are discussed among groups of faculty and staff but rarely shared with students. The experience described in this report shows that students themselves can make valuable and insightful contributions to the process of understanding the data returned with the NSSE results. Understanding how their peers perceive the Hilbert experience and adding their own experiences and insights into the discussion is something the students of this research methods class were both able and very willing to do. Their descriptions of differences between freshmen and seniors and between traditional and non-traditional students is generally consistent with quantitative findings from the local NSSE administration and with reports presented at the national level by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (<http://nsse.iub.edu/html/reports.cfm>).

The experience of sharing and discussing the student comments as well as the quantitative results from the NSSE with a small group of students as part of a class assignment in research methods suggests that it would be worthwhile to seek out other such opportunities in the future. In addition to

presenting the NSSE to classes in research methods or tests and measurement, these findings could be presented to student government groups and clubs. It would be potentially very valuable to convene groups that included both students and faculty to share comments and insights about assessment results. A similar model of sharing results with students should be possible with other assessment tools such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment.

References

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