State University of New York at Albany
Office of Institutional Research

CHANGES IN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE
IMPORTANCE OF THREE MAJOR GOALS OF COLLEGE

Student Outcomes Project
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wishing additional information are invited to contact Patrick T. Terenzini,
Director of Institutional Research, Administration 260, (518) 457-4621.
CHANGES IN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE
IMPORTANCE OF THREE MAJOR GOALS OF COLLEGE

Background

The belief that college attendance results in changes in students' attitudes and values is widely accepted as fact. The collegiate experience—particularly at institutions offering a liberal arts education to undergraduates—is intended to combat parochialism and to expose students to a variety of substantive intellectual areas and modes of inquiry, thereby freeing their minds and spirits from present constraints. Narrowness or single-mindedness of purpose is to be confronted with variety and attractive, new alternatives of study and purpose.

The effects of a liberal education can manifest themselves in many and varied ways. One such way would be changes in the importance students ascribe to certain educational goals. For example, one might expect a liberal education to produce an increase in the importance students attach to their education as an intellectually and personally broadening experience, as opposed, say, to the more instrumental role of college as preparation for employment. To what extent are such shifts apparent among SUNY-Albany students as they move through the educational experiences provided here?

This report summarizes the changes over a four-year period in the importance SUNY-Albany students attach to three educational goals. The results are based on a series of longitudinal surveys of two cohorts of students who entered the University as freshmen in the Fall semesters of 1978 and 1980. Students completed questionnaires in the summer before matriculation and at the end of each academic year thereafter. A fuller description of the general research program and methods on which the results described here are based is given in an addendum to this report.

One portion of the entering student survey and the yearly follow-up questionnaires asks students to describe the importance they attach at that point in their lives to three goals of a college education: 1) "gaining a liberal arts education and appreciation of ideas," 2) "gaining knowledge and skills directly applicable to a career," and 3) "learning about myself, my values, and my life's goals." Students are asked to rate the importance of each goal using a four-point scale, where 1 = "not at all important," and 4 = "extremely important."

Results

Table 1 arrays the annual means (and standard deviations) for each of the three goals in both of the longitudinal study cohorts. The table also reports, at the bottom, the percentage of students reporting each goal as being "very" or "extremely" important prior to their matriculation at Albany
and, for the 1978 cohort, at the end of their senior year. The percentages for the 1980 cohort are for pre-matriculation and the end of the sophomore year.

Goal: Gaining a Liberal Education

As can be seen in the table, the importance ascribed to "obtaining a liberal education and appreciation of ideas" increases steadily from the time of entry to the university through the senior year. The same trend is also apparent in the first two years for the 1980 cohort. For both groups of students, the increase from pre-college testing to the end of the freshman year is statistically reliable (p < .001). Moreover, the increases from sophomore-to-junior year, and from junior-to-senior year for the 1978 group are also statistically significant. Over the four-year period, the percentage of students reporting a liberal education as being very or extremely important increased by nearly 31 points, from 52 percent to 83 percent.

Goal: Career Preparation

The steady increase in the importance students ascribe to obtaining a liberal education presents a striking contrast with the nearly invariant importance students attach to preparing themselves for a career. Among the students who entered in 1978, changes in the mean are virtually imperceptible, and, indeed, differences in the importance of career preparation at the time of matriculation and in any subsequent year are attributable to chance variation. At the start of their Albany careers, and thereafter, eight out of ten students considered career preparation to be very or extremely important.

Among the 1980 cohort, even more of whom at the time of matriculation attached great importance to college as a place to prepare for a career (92% in the 1980 cohort v. 85% in the 1978 group), the variation is somewhat greater over the first two years, with a modest (but statistically reliable) decline from the pre-college level of importance attached to this goal.

Goal: Gaining Self-knowledge

The pattern for the goal of "learning about myself, my values and my life's goals" is similar to that for obtaining a liberal education, namely an initial level of importance that is decidedly below that of career preparation, but a steady increase over the college years until the mean ratings of the three goals are approximately the same in the senior year. For the 1978 cohort, the percentage reporting the goal of increased self-knowledge as very or extremely important increased from 60 percent at the time of first matriculation to 85 percent by the end of the senior year. That dramatic increase is not reflected, however, in the reports of the 1980 cohorts of students, a significantly greater percentage (85%) of whom reported this goal to be important at the time they began their Albany education. No explanation for this substantial difference between the two cohorts is readily apparent.
Summary

The results of these two studies indicate the transcendent importance of career preparation as a goal of SUNY-Albany undergraduates at the time they enter the University. Moreover, the evidence suggests only a slight decline—if any—in the importance subsequently attached to that goal. At no time in their college years does the percentage of students who believe career preparation is very or extremely important drop below 80 percent. By contrast, the importance attached to obtaining a liberal education and appreciation of ideas, and of obtaining greater knowledge of one's self and goals, increases steadily over the period, with statistically significant year-to-year increases evident in many instances. By the end of the senior year, the goals of liberal education and self-knowledge are approximately as important in students' minds as preparing for a career.

A series of multiple regressions were run in an effort to assess the extent to which the importance students attached to each of these goals at the end of the freshman year could be attributed to the Albany experience and, if so, to identify which collegiate experiences might be related to those changes (Theophilides, Terenzini, & Lorang, in press). Results of this study suggested significant roles for faculty in students' perceptions of the importance of a liberal education and of preparing for a career. After controlling for a wide variety of students' pre-college characteristics (e.g., academic aptitude, high school achievement, parents' education) and the level of importance attached to a goal at the time of matriculation, reliable and positive relations were identified between the frequency of non-classroom contact with faculty to discuss intellectual or course-related matters and the importance attached to obtaining a liberal education. Similarly, a significant relation was observed between the frequency of student-faculty contact to discuss a future career and the importance attached at the end of the freshman year to preparing oneself for a career. Interestingly, the regression on the importance of self-knowledge as a goal indicated that increases in importance were unrelated to dimensions of the collegiate experience tapped by the variables used in this study. This result may indicate that changes in the importance attached to self-knowledge is more a matter of normal maturation than of any particular aspect of the collegiate experience itself.

The causal order of these relations is, of course, ambiguous: do some students seek more contact than their peers with faculty members because they (students) are undergoing changes in their educational goals while their peers are not, or do those goals themselves undergo change as a consequence of students' contact with faculty members? The matter may never be resolved with certainty, and it may well be that the relation is, to some extent, reciprocal. What does seem clear is the important involvement of faculty members in the educational goal change process. It seems likely, for example, that faculty members may act both as information sources and as counselors during their informal interactions with students, interactions that
are potentially rich in their influence on students' attitudes and values. Previous research supports these propositions. Jacob (1957, p. 8), for example, concluded that "faculty influence appears more pronounced . . . when students find teachers receptive to unhurried and relaxed conversations out of class." Following a thirteen-college study, Gaff (1973, p. 609) concluded that "the single biggest difference between influential faculty and their colleagues is the extent to which they interact with students outside the classroom."

The evidence gathered to-date on students who entered Albany in 1978 and 1980 indicates quite clearly that the goals of obtaining a liberal education and gaining self-knowledge increase steadily in importance for significant numbers of our students in the course of their years on this campus. Indeed, by the senior year, students attach as much importance to these two goals as to preparing themselves for a career. These results are consistent with the proposition suggested earlier that exposure to a liberal education might be expected to produce an increase in the importance students attach to their education as an intellectually and personally broadening experience. Moreover, the results of other analyses (on the freshman year importance of various goals) indicates that faculty members may be significant agents of the changes observed in the importance students attach to various goals of a college education.

The influence of faculty on the importance students attach to a liberal education or self-knowledge during the later years of college has not yet been documented at Albany. Nonetheless, the question arises of whether the potential for impact by faculty on students in this area of their education is now being fully realized. An earlier report in this series (see Office of Institutional Research, Student Outcomes Research Report No. 1) indicated that student-faculty contact outside of class was infrequent at best, particularly during the early years of college. One can only speculate on the extent to which the growth in the importance attached to a liberal education and student self-knowledge would be even more marked if student-faculty contact were more frequent than it apparently is at present.

REFERENCES


Theophilides C., & Terenzini, P.T., & Lorang, W.G. The relation between freshman-year experience and perceived importance of four major educational goals. Research in Higher Education, in press.
### TABLE 1
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND SAMPLE Ns FOR EACH GOAL
BY AGE, COHORT AND YEAR

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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prematriculation</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>2.9*</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>2.9*</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.4*</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>3.2*</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>3.0*</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.4*</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>3.3*</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.1*</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.4*</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.3*</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Percentage reporting goal is "very" or "extremely" important at time of matriculation and in senior (1980 = sophomore) year: 52% & 83%, 63% & 72%, 85% & 80%, 92% & 83%, 60% & 85%, 85% & 87%.

*aInformation available only up to the sophomore year.

*Statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) when compared to the preceding year's mean.
Addendum 1

STUDENT OUTCOMES RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With the help of a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, through the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), the SUNY-Albany Office of Institutional Research is engaged in three longitudinal studies of students who enter the University as freshmen. The purpose of these studies is to monitor the characteristics, goals and aspirations of freshmen entering the University, and to discover how and when these students change personally and intellectually in the course of their years at Albany. The studies are intended to enhance academic and non-academic management and planning by identifying--so far as possible--the important influences on student changes, particularly those that are within the institution's power to shape or direct in an effort to increase both the quality and efficacy of the University's academic and non-academic programs, policies and services.

The overall design of each of the three studies is longitudinal and ex post facto. During Summer Planning Conferences, entering freshmen were asked to complete a questionnaire seeking a wide variety of information about their personal, family and educational backgrounds, as well as about their educational expectations and career aspirations. Students who entered the University as freshmen in the Fall semesters of 1978, 1980 and 1982 are the subjects of this research program. Pre-matriculation data were sought from all entering freshmen in 1978 and 1982, whereas a random half of the class entering in 1980 was selected for participation in the study.

In April of each academic year, a detailed, locally-developed questionnaire is sent to all respondents to the preceding data collection (see below). The instrument asks students to describe, for the year just ending, such things as the frequency of their contact with faculty members, the level of their involvement in extra-curricular activities, the extent of the personal and intellectual development they believe they have experienced, as well as their attitudes about their experiences.

The annual follow-up surveys are conducted by mail (return postage is provided). The table below arrays for each survey year the target population and the absolute number of responses and response rates for each survey. In all surveys, with minor exceptions, statistical tests indicate that each year's respondents are representative of their parent population of freshmen with respect to sex, race/ethnicity, academic aptitude (SAT scores), parents' combined education, parents' annual income, highest degree sought and academic achievement (percentile rank in high school class). The freshman year data for the 1978 cohort is a noteworthy exception: women and higher achieving students (in high school) are overrepresented at statistically significant levels, although the absolute magnitudes of the differences are slight.
### POPULATION, SAMPLE SIZES AND RESPONSE RATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entering Cohort Year</th>
<th>Freshman Population</th>
<th>Original Sample n %</th>
<th>FOLLOW-UP YEAR</th>
<th>Freshman n %</th>
<th>Sophomore n %</th>
<th>Junior n %</th>
<th>Senior n %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>2,255</td>
<td>1,360 60%</td>
<td>469 35%</td>
<td>533 a</td>
<td>359 67%</td>
<td>281 78%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2,183</td>
<td>1,103 51%</td>
<td>730 66%</td>
<td>471 65%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>1,798</td>
<td>1,702 96%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*The Sophomore Year follow-up was sent to the 469 Freshman Year respondents and to a random half of the non-respondents to that survey.*

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