This study is part of an ongoing series of outcomes assessment efforts by the University. Those who wish additional information are invited to contact J. Fredericks Volkwein, Director of Institutional Research.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Multi Year Analysis of Trends in Student Opinions
at The University at Albany

In 1978, 1985, and 1988, The Office of Institutional Research surveyed representative cross sections of students using broadbased student opinion surveys. We believe that student responses reflect the reality of the Albany campus with reasonable accuracy because we have observed a great deal of congruency among our various freshman, senior, and alumni studies, and because there have been many occasions when student responses have been sensitive to specific campus episodes.

- Albany students of all groups report that they are generally satisfied with their classroom experiences and their intellectual and personal growth.

- Student opinion ratings suggest that there have been steady improvements in the quality of teaching, faculty availability, and academic advisement. Unfortunately, academic advisement still is an area of low academic satisfaction. Students generally are satisfied with most aspects of academic life at Albany, including courses and classrooms and the Library, but not course availability.

- Outside the classroom, there has been a steady improvement only in satisfaction with recreational programs, making it the highest satisfaction item in 1988. Other areas of high student satisfaction are athletic facilities, bus service, the student newspaper and radio station, and the rating of Albany overall.

- There has been steady satisfaction decline in the areas of food service, and student government, making them among the lowest satisfaction areas in 1988. Other areas of low student satisfaction in 1988 are parking, concern for the individual student, use of student activity fees, staff attitude, racial harmony, personal safety, and various rules.

- While almost 9 out of 10 students report that their intellectual and personal growth is at least "moderate," only about half rate their growth in writing skills at that level.

- The attitude similarities in student sub-populations are more striking than the differences. We have generally failed to find reliable differences in the responses of men and women. The attitude differences we find in the other sub-groups (such as differences by class year, by ethnicity, by residence, by entry status) are limited to a small number of items. On the whole, we find high student agreement in student attitudes about academic and residential life on the campus.

- In general, the typical freshman is more satisfied with campus facilities and services and is also more at ease about personal safety and security than other students (many of whom live off campus). On the negative side, freshmen report less satisfaction with course availability.

- Juniors and seniors who entered as transfers report about the same level of satisfaction with the University as those who enter as freshmen. Transfer juniors and seniors have lower levels of social integration and report less personal growth, but about the same intellectual growth, as native juniors and seniors.
INTRODUCTION – Is Student Opinion a Valid Reflection of Campus Reality?

Student opinion is viewed to be a necessary, but not sufficient, ingredient in any assessment program. The University at Albany regularly samples student opinion as part of our ongoing assessment efforts. In 1978, 1985, and 1988, The Office of Institutional Research surveyed representative cross sections of students using broadbased student opinion surveys. In 1985 and 1988, we participated in SUNY sponsored, statewide administrations of the ACT Student Opinion Survey. Several years earlier, in 1978, we had undertaken our own student opinion survey which had 13 items in common with the ACT, and 7 other items which had similar meaning (e.g., quality of teaching vs. quality of instruction). This enables multi-year comparisons.

The educational research community generally considers student opinion and satisfaction measures to be valid reflections of the relationship between student expectations and perceived reality. Student reported measures can be judged to be accurate to the extent that they are sensitive to campus events and to the extent that they are congruent with other findings.

We believe that student responses reflect the reality of the Albany campus with reasonable accuracy because we have observed a great deal of congruency among our various freshman, senior, and alumni studies, and because there have been many occasions when student responses have been sensitive to specific campus episodes. The first graph, for instance, shows the satisfaction outcomes resulting from changes to the campus bus service and to registration. Over the years, students have generally regarded the bus service (which links the Uptown and Downtown Campuses and provides transportation to off-campus students) with respect, if not affection. However, in 1984–85 a controversy occurred over the need to impose a fee in order to make the bus service more self-supporting. Students obviously were unhappy with the fee, and this is reflected in the survey results collected in Spring 1985.
A second example is the Spring 1988 registration ratings which were collected six weeks after the upsetting introduction of a new computer information and registration system. In January 1988 long lines were created in the registration area by students attempting to enter closed courses. The problem was eventually solved by granting students access to closed courses only through their instructors and by passing out hourly appointment slips to the registration site. While student unhappiness over the 1988 registration is evident in the ratings, we expect that the next survey will show a rebound to former levels.

A third example appears in the second chart. The campus in the early 1980s became aware of several incidents of student cheating and academic dishonesty. Indeed, the 1985 survey showed that only 2% of the students reported that they had never been in a course where cheating occurred. After the President held discussions with Faculty Senators and Vice Presidents, the Undergraduate Dean implemented a number of new policies and procedures and held a series of meetings with each academic department to elicit faculty cooperation. The result was a strengthening of both classroom management and the campus judicial system, with the improvement in student satisfaction reflected in the 1988 student responses. The number of students who have "never" been in a class where cheating occurred has risen to 31% and the students who report "often" attending such classes (defined operationally as one out of three) has dropped to 17%.

These examples suggest that student responses, at least changes in our student responses, tend to reflect the realities of campus life. Therefore, it seems prudent to monitor student opinion periodically, and to examine the results for assessment evidence.
IMPORTANT TRENDS IN ALBANY STUDENT OPINION

The survey results reflect relatively positive academic assessments and trends. The chart below compares percentages of Albany students answering "satisfied" or "very satisfied" on a 5 point Likert-type scale to a number of key academic items in the 1978, 1985, and 1988 surveys. Student responses suggest that there have been steady improvements in the quality of teaching, faculty availability and academic advisement. Unfortunately, academic advisement remains the area of lowest academic satisfaction. On the question of study space, there has been a steady decline in the satisfaction of students, reflecting no doubt the competition for space created on campus by higher enrollments combined with more academic programs, research facilities, computer rooms, and services. Student satisfaction with the Library had dropped from 85% in 1978 to 70% in 1985 but was up to 79% in 1988, making it the highest rated academic area. Students generally express satisfaction with most aspects of academic life at Albany including the courses in their major, course variety, and even classroom facilities, but not course availability.

The fourth chart compares percentages of Albany students answering "satisfied" or "very satisfied" to a number of key non-academic items in the 1978, 1985, and 1988 surveys. In the areas of campus life outside the classroom, there has been a steady improvement only in satisfaction with recreational programs, making it the highest satisfaction item overall in 1988. However, student satisfaction with the campus bus service, student newspaper and radio station, also are high. There has been steady satisfaction decline in the areas of food service and student government, in the latter case very steep. These two items are among the lowest satisfaction areas in 1988. For counseling services, social life, parking, and personal safety, there was an increase in satisfaction between 1978 and 1985, with a subsequent drop in 1988.
Overall, the areas of highest student satisfaction in 1988 are recreational programs (81%), Library (79%), quality of teaching (70%), courses in the major (70%), course variety (70%), athletic facilities (68%), bus service (68%), faculty availability (66%), classroom facilities (65%), student newspaper and radio (64%), and the rating of Albany overall (74%). The areas of lowest student satisfaction warranting our attention are parking (18%), concern for students as individuals (19%), food service (21%), use of activity fees (24%), student government (25%), registration (25%), probation policy (29%), racial harmony (30%), staff attitude toward students (32%), residence hall rules (35%), student conduct rules (37%), personal safety (37%), and academic advisement (39%).

On the campus-specific portion of the survey, we have been asking students to self-report (on a 5 point scale) the amount of growth they have undergone as a result of their Albany experience. We are especially interested in their perceptions of their own intellectual and cognitive growth, their personal and social growth, and their growth in writing skills. The chart below shows a small (but not statistically significant) improvement in student intellectual growth and personal growth between 1985 and 1988. However, student assessments of their own writing abilities are not as positive.

In recent surveys we have attempted to analyze various sub-populations of students. Thus, in 1985 we over-sampled EOP and minority students so that we might reliably compare their satisfaction with that of other students. In both 1985 and 1988 we compared the responses of men and women, and the responses of those living in residence halls on-campus with those living in apartments off-campus. We used the 1988 data for special studies of freshmen responses and of transfer juniors and seniors.

Throughout these investigations, the similarities in student responses are more striking than the differences. We have generally failed to find reliable differences in the responses of men and women. The significant attitude differences we find in the other groups (such as differences by class year, by ethnicity, by residence, by entry status) are limited to a small number of items. We find relatively high student agreement in student attitudes about academic and residential life on the campus.
Three Kinds of Growth Reported by Albany Students

Percent Reporting (1 & 2) Slight or No Growth


Percent Moderate Growth (3)


Percent Reporting (4 & 5) Large or Extremely Large Growth

- Personal Growth: 63 (1985), 64 (1988)
This conclusion is perhaps most visible in the 1985 and 1988 responses to the item asking students to indicate satisfaction with the campus "in general." The chart below shows that the percent satisfied across various populations ranges from 63% to 76% and the percent dissatisfied displays an even narrower range (9% to 14%). None of these mean responses are significantly different from the mean for all undergraduates. However, the 1988 mean for Albany undergraduates is significantly higher than the mean for the other SUNY Centers.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT SUB–POPULATIONS

The sections below identify the few differences we find between freshmen, transfers, EOP students, and other undergraduates.

Freshman Responses

In the most recent survey (1988) we gave particular attention to the opinions of freshmen. The University has given a priority to improving the freshman year experience. This priority was expressed in part in 1989 when the University appointed a special Co–Curricular Commission on the Freshman Experience and when improvements in orientation and residential life programs were introduced in 1988 and 1989. To inform ourselves about the freshman experience, we examined the ways in which the responses of freshmen differed from sophomores, juniors and seniors in 1988.

We found in both 1985 and 1988 that students in general, and freshmen in particular, are satisfied with the academic aspects of the campus, except for academic advisement, course availability, and registration, noted earlier. Most non–academic areas also received positive ratings, but negative ratings were reserved for food service, parking, and campus concern for students as individuals. When asked if they had the decision to make again, two out of three indicated that they would still choose Albany.
The next chart displays the items where the freshmen responses depart from their fellow students. Out of nearly 100 survey items, there are barely a dozen where the freshman response means differ from other students to a statistically significant degree. In general, the typical freshman is more satisfied than other students with campus facilities and services, including the orientation program, athletic facilities, health service, bookstore, housing, and campus center. Freshmen (living mostly on campus) are also more at ease about personal safety than other students (many of whom live off campus), and they have observed significantly less academic dishonesty than upper classmen.

On the other hand, freshmen report less satisfaction with course availability, and most agree on the need for more study space, more outside speakers and more campus warmth, but they feel these needs less than other students do. They exceed other students in their desire to have more social events in the residence halls. Interestingly, the majority of upperclassmen and freshmen alike believe that the amount of organized academic activity in the residence halls (and indeed their own study habits) are "about right." On the whole, freshmen attitudes are not significantly different from those of other students. If anything, freshmen may be easier to please.

Transfer Students

We examined the responses of juniors and seniors who entered as freshmen and compared them to those of juniors and seniors who entered as transfers from another institution. Our analysis suggests that transfer student opinions are more like those of other undergraduates than different from them. Over the years, there have been very few areas where students who enter as transfers differ from those who enter as freshmen. The two groups, for example, are similar in their satisfaction with the quality of instruction, course content in the major, advisor availability, and their own academic progress and intellectual growth. If they could make their choice of institution again, transfer upperclassmen (67%) are about as likely to choose Albany again as those who entered as freshmen (69%).
We do have some evidence that transfer juniors and seniors have lower levels of social integration than native juniors and seniors. In Assessment Report No. 5, we reported that transfer seniors are less socially connected to their peers than native seniors. Our 1985 and 1988 opinion surveys show that upper division transfers report less personal growth during their years at Albany. Transfer students are less likely to experience the collegiate community experience associated with living in the residence halls, and have been at Albany a shorter period of time.

The next chart shows the only six 1988 survey items where transfer juniors and seniors differed significantly from their counterparts. Transfer upper division students are less satisfied with the bus service, but they are more satisfied with computing services, class size, and academic advising. They are significantly less dissatisfied with parking than other students. As noted above, they report significantly less personal growth during their years at Albany.

**EOP Student Responses**

1985 was the only time we collected enough EOP student responses (N = 75) to analyze them separately. EOP students hold similar attitudes to other undergraduates along a variety of dimensions, including their assessment of teaching quality, faculty and staff attitudes, and their own intellectual and personal growth. The chart below shows the only items where we found significant differences between EOP and non-EOP student responses in 1985. The data show that EOP students report higher levels of satisfaction with academic advising and the quality of information provided by their advisors. Moreover, they indicate greater growth in writing skills than most other students. On the other hand, EOP students reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction with campus racial harmony, student employment opportunities, billing & payment procedures, activity fee use, student government, student newspaper & radio, and social life. In all other areas of academic and residential life, their responses were not significantly different from the larger population.
If they had the opportunity to do so, 53% would choose Albany again. This is significantly lower than the rest of the sample, but we don't know exactly why. The Albany EOP Program compared to others in the State has received favorable evaluations. By definition, however, this group of students is academically "at risk" and has a lower graduation rate than those admitted in other categories. Albany is no doubt a difficult institution for EOP students and adjustment is difficult. This may have something to do with their lower likelihood of wanting to return to Albany all over again.

Comparison to SUNY Norms

One of the values of using the ACT Student Opinion Survey, instead of a strictly local instrument, is that it provides comparative data. However, research suggests that there are rather significant and consistent regional differences in student opinions and attitudes. Students in the South and Mid-West, for example, are generally less critical of their institutions than students in the Northeast in general, and New York in particular. The ACT National Norms are based on a population which is dominated by smaller colleges in the "Sunbelt" and Mid-West. Comparing Albany with our SUNY peers therefore, is more meaningful and appropriate.

Albany, Buffalo and Stony Brook participated in the ACT survey in both 1985 and 1988. The table shows the Albany comparison with available data from the other two SUNY Centers. For the majority of survey items, student satisfaction at Albany is not statistically different from the average of the other two Centers. In all, there are twelve items that are significantly above the average of the other Centers in 1985, and in 1988 there are fifteen, a 25% increase. A similar increase, however, occurs for the opinion items which fall below average. They rose from eight in 1985 to ten in 1988. Our students give us a significantly higher overall rating than at the other SUNY Centers.

Ironically, Albany student responses place us above the norm in some of our lowest rated areas (such as parking and personal safety), but below the norm in some of our highest rated areas (such as library and athletic facilities). On the academic items, relative satisfaction with the academic calendar and classroom
facilities remain high, but satisfaction with study space, library facilities, academic advising, and the value of the advisor's information has remained below average compared to the other two Centers. In the non-academic arena, satisfaction with parking, buildings and grounds, residence hall services, student voice in policy making, involvement in activities, and personal safety has remained consistently above the SUNY Center norms, while satisfaction with athletic facilities and career preparation has remained unchanged and below the norms. The only item which moved from above the norm in 1985, to below it in 1988, is racial harmony. This corresponds chronologically with a 50% increase in the number of freshman minority students admitted to Albany, and the campus since 1988 has undertaken a number of initiatives to promote racial harmony.

Conclusion

This report displays the most important findings from student opinion surveys in 1978, 1985, and 1988, shows multi-year trends, and compares the responses of different student populations. Albany students of all groups report that they are generally satisfied with their classroom experiences and with their own intellectual and personal growth and with Albany "in general." The trends in our ratings suggest that there have been steady improvements in the quality of teaching and faculty availability. Academic advising rates low but improving. The campus has given these areas a high priority and student responses suggest that our efforts have been effective.

On the other hand, the data show deteriorating satisfaction in several areas of student life outside the classroom. While the declines in food service and parking may come as no surprise to those who interact with students, the declines in student ratings of their own student government and personal safety may be unexpected. (Those who live on-campus, however, are less fearful than those who live off-campus.) Study space and racial harmony are much discussed concerns that we have been addressing. Students also see this as a campus which exhibits less concern for the individual than they would like. Nevertheless, most students give Albany a high overall rating.