

GENERAL EDUCATION SKILL ATTAINMENT REPORTED BY FIVE GROUPS OF ALBANY SENIORS

Introduction

Assessment report #13 builds upon assessment reports #4 and #6. Assessment Report #4 examined the impact of General Education Courses on the freshmen who entered the University at Albany in the fall of 1982. Assessment Report #6 assessed the general education skill attainment of the seniors enrolled in the Spring 1986 by comparing them to Spring 1982 seniors. This Assessment Report #13 takes the analysis a step further by examining the general education skill attainment of the seniors enrolled in the Spring 1990 and comparing them to both the 1982 and 1986 cohorts of seniors. The 1982 seniors represent a "pre-Gen Ed" population, while the 1986 and 1990 seniors entered the University under a consistent set of Gen Ed Requirements.

To assess the impact of the then new General Education Program, faculty members of the General Education Committee in 1982 were asked to identify in the Albany Outcomes Assessment Survey those items which they believed would show student improvement if the General Education program was having its intended effect. Committee members agreed on the items shown in chart 1. We of course cannot attribute changes in student responses exclusively to the Gen Ed Program. In fact, it seems likely that the major field of study and the entire undergraduate experience contributes importantly to writing skills, critical thinking, and the like. Nevertheless, these *post hoc* survey results constitute our best evidence about the possible impact of the General Education Program on these groups of graduating seniors.

The use of student self-reported measures is a growing trend in higher education. However, self-reported measures are more appropriate for measuring the performance of groups than for measuring the performance of individual students. (See pp. 12-13 of Assessment Report #12 for a discussion of the evidence.) On the Albany Outcomes Survey, students are asked to estimate, on a nine-point growth scale, the amount of overall progress they made on a variety educational outcomes since first attending the University.

CHART 1

Growth in General Education Skills Among Albany Seniors Who Entered as Freshman

(Percent seniors reporting 7, 8 or 9 on 9-point growth scale)

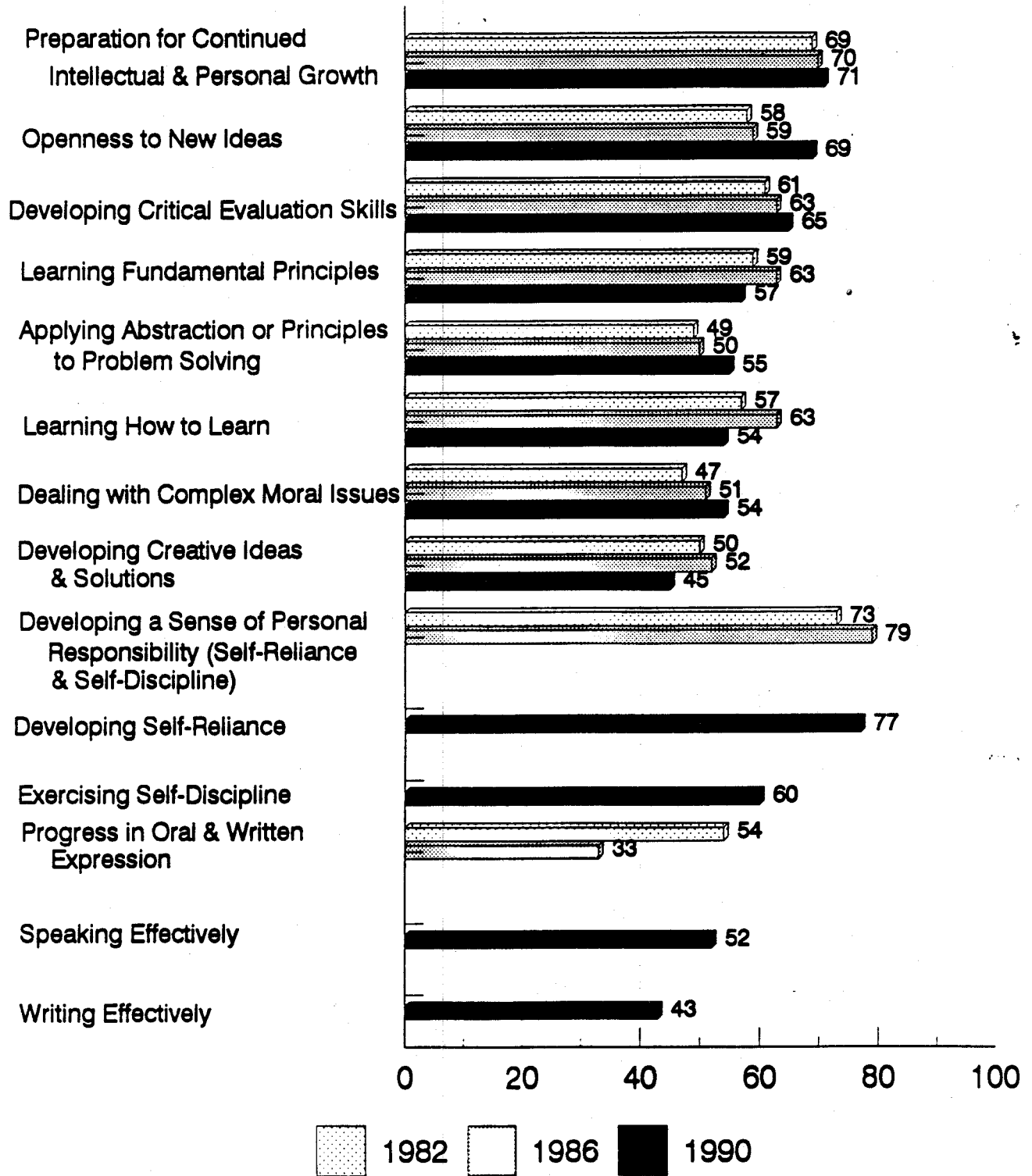


Chart 2 shows how the 1986 and 1990 cohorts of seniors who entered as **transfer students** responded to the same intellectual growth items. In six areas the 1990 transfer seniors collectively report a larger amount of intellectual growth than the 1986 transfer seniors: "Preparation for Continued Intellectual & Personal Growth," "Openness to New Ideas," "Developing Critical Evaluation Skills," "Learning Fundamental Principles," "Applying Abstraction or Principles to Problem Solving," and Developing Creative Ideas and Solutions."

In two other areas ("Learning How to Learn" and "Dealing with Complex Moral Issues") the 1986 seniors report a larger amount of intellectual growth than the 1990 seniors. In "Developing Self-Reliance," the 1990 seniors reported greater progress than the 1986 group reported on the combined item, but in "Exercising Self-Discipline" they reported less intellectual growth than the 1986 group did on the combined item. In both "Speaking Effectively" and "Writing Effectively" the 1990 transfer seniors reported higher intellectual progress than the 1986 group reported on the combined item "Progress in Oral and Written Expression."

Chart 3 shows the results of combining all of these "Gen Ed" items into one scale for each of the three freshman and two transfer cohorts who completed the assessment survey as seniors. As expected, those who enter as native freshmen collectively attribute more of their growth to educational experiences at Albany than do those who enter as transfers and receive part of their undergraduate education elsewhere. The differences between the transfer seniors and the freshman seniors are statistically significant. The differences among the means for the three cohorts of native freshmen are not statistically significant, nor are the differences between the two transfer cohorts.

We hoped to find an improving trend, given the changes in the general education program, and we did in the means for the two groups of transfer seniors, but we did not among the freshmen. However, even the improvement between the two cohorts of transfer seniors is not statistically significant.

Conclusion

What do these results mean? Overall, it appears that the general education skills of graduating seniors have changed little from the pre-Gen Ed to the post-Gen Ed period. Even though the 1986 seniors who entered as freshmen and the 1990 seniors who entered as transfers report slightly larger amounts of intellectual growth than their 1982 counterparts, these results are statistically non-significant.

Within the overall picture, however, we see some interesting effects. Apparently, the Gen Ed Program is having a favorable impact on student evaluation and problem solving skills, on their openness to new ideas, and on their preparation for further growth. In other skill areas, the impact on students has remained roughly the same or slipped a little. This lack of progress is a particular concern regarding skills like writing effectively which have been given a high priority by the faculty, and like speaking effectively which have been given a high priority by Albany Alumni (See Assessment Report # 10).

Another likely explanation is that these results reflect more on the undergraduate curriculum as a whole than they do on the specifics of the general education requirements. In any case, these findings call for additional faculty efforts to make constructive changes in the undergraduate curriculum.