Environment, Experience, and Outcomes:
Using The College Student Experience Questionnaire for Assessment And Accreditation

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Overview

Robert Pace developed the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) in the 1970's at UCLA (followed by the CCSEQ, designed for community colleges), based on research showing a strong relationship between college learning and the quality of student effort and involvement (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991). The CSEQ measures the contributions students make to their college learning as well as the resources and opportunities provided by the institution. This combination of student effort and institutional resources is termed "quality of effort." The CSEQ is based the premise that what counts most in college learning is *what students do rather than who they are*. This approach differs from other research on college learning that focuses primarily on student characteristics such as race, class, or family background, or measures of academic preparation such as GPA or SAT scores. The CSEQ addresses these questions:

- Who are your students?
- Where are they in their program of study?
- What do they do at your institution?
- How do they perceive the institution's environment?
- What have they gained from their college experience?

The CSEQ survey instrument and materials provided by its developers include:

- information about students' background and their status in college;
- an index of student satisfaction with college;
- a report on student reading, writing, and involvement in other learning activities;
- student ratings of key characteristics of the college environment;
- estimates of student gains (progress) toward important academic objectives;
- an index measuring capacity for life-long learning;
- in index measuring exposure to good practices in undergraduate education; and
- norms for items, scales and indexes based on type of college or university.

The norms that the authors of the CSEQ provide are especially useful because they enable institutions to make meaningful comparisons between the students at their college or university and those at a similar type of institution. For example, The Evergreen State College can compare its students with those at General Liberal Arts Colleges (7 other colleges, 3,097 students) or Select Liberal Arts Colleges (8 other colleges, 4,490 other students).

Some common uses for the CSEQ include assessment, accreditation, and accountability. For example, assessment focuses on student learning outcomes, measured by the CSEQ in terms of students' estimates of gains across academic areas. Accreditation focuses on institutional quality and improvement, as well as learning outcomes. Student involvement in their education and student ratings of the college environment may be used in assessing the quality of undergraduate programs. Accountability may require assessing the use of institutional resources and faculty productivity.

Astin, A. W. (1993). What matters most in college: Four critical years revisited. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
Pascarella, E. T. & Terrenzini, P. T. (1991). How college affects students. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Why the CSEQ was selected at Evergreen

Accreditation

The CSEQ was considered Fall Quarter 1996, during planning stages for our October 1998 Accreditation. Accrediting bodies across the nation are placing greater emphasis on assessment of student learning outcomes. While Evergreen has engaged in assessment activities under a state mandate for a number years, little work that allowed comparative judgments had been done. It seemed time to take that step for accreditation purposes. The CSEQ was a good choice for three reasons: (1) The conceptual framework of the CSEQ -- that greater student engagement in learning and the college environment leads to gains in learning outcomes -- resonates well with our assumptions about the effects of learning communities; (2) Normative data from the CSEQ are available to answer the "compared to what" questions coming with increasing frequency (and velocity) from external audiences; and (3) The CSEQ "Estimated Gain" items include a mix of learning outcomes appropriate to a liberal arts college that received a favorable review by our faculty.

Accountability

With the close of the legislative session in spring 1997, formal "accountability measures" were required of public higher education in our state. Three were prescribed, two more were defined by topic but specific definition was left to negotiation between each institution and the HEC Board. One definition to be developed was a measure of "faculty productivity." We were required to submit formal "Accountability Plans," including a measure of faculty productivity, by August 1997. Student credit hours/faculty member (SCH/Fac) is a common measure of faculty effort. It is popular with the legislature, HEC Board, and arguably, the general public. Several state institutions supported SCH/Fac to measure faculty productivity.

At Evergreen, the ratio of student credit hours/faculty is already quite high. In fact, reducing the student/faculty ratio at Evergreen, or at least holding ground against pressures for it to increase, is among the most firmly held convictions of our faculty. Ground rules for the Accountability Plans included a steady ratcheting upward of each measure through the year 2010. An alternative to SCH/Fac was needed. Serendipitously, the CSEQ learning outcomes data had just been collected. A composite of the CSEQ student learning outcomes items, the "Capacity for Life-Long Learning" index was selected as Evergreen's measure of faculty productivity. Admittedly, part of the attraction to this measure resulted from what it was not -- SCH/Fac -- but we also viewed it as a fair measure of "faculty productivity" for an institution as heavily focused on teaching as Evergreen.

The Content of the College Student Experience Questionnaire

Measuring Quality of Effort

Student learning takes place in libraries, arts facilities, science labs, recreation centers, and campus housing, as well as in the classroom. The CSEQ considers these institutional resources to be major investments in undergraduate education. Contacts with faculty and other students, experiences leading to self-understanding, involvement in clubs and organizations, experiences in writing, and conversations with other students are also important for college learning. Quality of effort is measured by student involvement in various activities that are important to learning and personal development. Several scales based on activities indicate increasing levels of student involvement:

1. Course Learning (10 activities)
2. Library Experiences (10 activities)
3. Art, Music, Theater (12 activities)
4. Science (10 activities)
5. Student Union (10 activities)
6. Athletic and Recreation Facilities (10 activities)
7. Campus Residence (10 activities)
8. Experiences with Faculty (10 activities)
9. Clubs and Organizations (10 activities)
10. Experiences in Writing (10 activities)
11. Personal Experiences (10 activities)
12. Student Acquaintances (10 activities)
13. Topics of Conversation (10 activities)
14. Information in Conversations (10 activities)

Measuring the College Environment

The CSEQ contains eight scales related to characteristics of college environments that encourage students to put forth effort in educationally purposeful activities. Five of the rating scales refer to the extent to which the environment emphasizes certain aspects of student learning and personal development. These are seven-point rating scales (7 = *strong emphasis*, 1 = *weak emphasis*), reflecting the following aspects of the college experience: 1) development of academic, scholarly, and intellectual qualities; 2) development of aesthetic, expressive, and creative qualities; 3) being critical, evaluative, and analytical; 4) development of vocational and occupational competence; and 5) personal relevance and practical value of courses.

There are also 3 seven-point rating scales measuring relationships with faculty, other students, and administrative staff. For example, the positive end of the scale for relationships with faculty is defined as "approachable, helpful, understanding, encouraging;" the negative end is defined as "remote, discouraging, unsympathetic." The positive end of the scale for relationships with other students is defined as "friendly, supportive, sense of belonging;" the negative end is defined as "competitive, uninvolved, sense of alienation."

Measuring Student Progress

Gains. The CSEQ includes 23 items measuring students' estimates of their gains in these "clusters": 1) general education, literature, arts, and social sciences; 2) personal development and social competence; 3) science and technology; 4) intellectual skills; and 5) vocational competence. Students are asked to rate their progress on a four-point scale, in which 1 = *very little*, 2 = *some*, 3 = *quite a bit*, and 4 = *very much*.

Measuring Capacity for Life-Long Learning. Capacity for Life-Long Learning is an index based on 11 of the gains items listed below that are a subset of the 23 gains items. With each of the 11 skill areas worth 1 to 4 points, the possible range for the Life-Long Leaming index is 11 to 44. The sum of these items represent a set of skills, competencies, and attitudes for working well "with others in a world in which economic and social problems are increasingly abstract and complex:"

1. Specialization for further education
2. Broad general education
3. Writing clearly and effectively
4. Use of computers
5. Understanding other people
6. Functioning as a team member
7. Understanding new scientific and technical developments
8. Ability to think analytically and logically
9. Quantitative thinking
10. Ability to synthesize or put ideas together
11. Ability to learn on one's own, inquire and find information.

Procedure

A total of 1257 Evergreen students enrolled in coordinated studies programs, internships, and independent studies completed the CSEQ during Spring Quarter 1997. The survey was administered in class to 1670 students enrolled in 58 programs across all academic areas, of whom 1098 (66%) completed the survey. The response rate was lower for the 707 students enrolled in internships or independent studies. These students received the survey in the mail along with a letter explaining the purpose of the survey. Of this group, 159 (22%) completed the survey. Total undergraduate enrollment in Spring Quarter 1997 was 3145 students, thus the number of student completing the survey comprised 40% of all undergraduates enrolled that quarter.

Life-Long Learning: Preliminary Results Relating to Assessment and Accountability

According to the CSEQ Handbook, mean differences that are greater than 2.0 on the Life-Long Learning Index are "probably meaningful and warrant attention." Consistent with the College Student Experience model, we found that Life-Long Learning was unrelated to these student demographic variables: gender, race, and age (see Charts A, B and C). However, we did find a relationship between student rating of Life-Long Learning and other variables indicating the amount of involvement in learning, the amount of time a student has spent in college, and the amount of time a student has spent at Evergreen. Using the 2.0 difference criterion, we found a meaningful difference in Life-Long Learning every two years -- between freshmen and juniors and between sophomores and juniors. A large proportion of students at Evergreen transfer in from other colleges. We found a similar set of "steps" between students based on the number of credits they had earned at Evergreen (see Charts D and E). The number of hours per week that a student spent in study, a good indicator of involvement, was also directly related to Life-Long Learning (see Chart F). Relationships with faculty and relationships with other students were also important to Life-Long Learning (see Charts G and H). These findings support the CSEQ model which places emphasis on student involvement and experience, as well as the Evergreen philosophy of close interaction between faculty and students to promote learning that is active, collaborative, and connected.

Comparing Evergreen students with national norms for general liberal arts colleges, we found substantial differences in several areas of Life-Long Learning. Evergreen students gave themselves higher ratings in: specialization for further education; ability to learn on their own; ability to think analytically; and ability to synthesize or put ideas together. There were several areas in which Evergreen was higher than the national norm, but not substantially: acquiring a broad general education; writing clearly and effectively; use of computers; understanding other people; functioning as a team member; and understanding new scientific and technical developments. The one area where Evergreen was lower, although not substantially, was in quantitative thinking.

Where are we going from here?

Currently, we are conducting phone interviews with enrolled undergraduates, using the Life-Long Learning items. As mentioned previously, we plan to use results for the Faculty Productivity measure for state accountability. The advantages of the phone interviews is that they do not take up class time and are relatively simple to administer. There are also some disadvantages: the use of a different response mode (phone vs. paper) may influence results, as may completing 11 free-standing items vs. completing these items after having completed several pages of the CSEQ which require students to think about and reflect on their college learning. Another consideration has been brought to our attention by the student phone interviewers. Several students, especially older ones, reported that they had not made gains in certain areas (e.g., writing, getting along with other people) at the college because they had already acquired those skills before enrolling at Evergreen. Results of the Life-Long Learning phone survey will be analyzed at the end of Spring Quarter, 1998, and discussions about continuing the use of this instrument will follow.