

Collaborative Work in the College Class: Advantages, Challenges, and Outcomes

Laura Coghlan and Jennifer Rodriguez
The Evergreen State College

Outline

Part I: Framing

Why is collaborative learning important?

- NSSE benchmark
- AACU/LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes
- Institutional goals
- Employers

Part II: Collaborative learning

Assessment

- Frequency of collaboration
- Quality of interaction
- Seminars and other group work
- Alumni outcomes

Part III: Interactions across differences

Assessment

- Student learning outcomes
- Frequency of interaction
- Respect for differences
- Alumni outcomes
- Reflective learning

Part IV: Strategies for successful collaboration

Faculty approaches

Part V: Discussion and practice sharing

Notes

Collaborative Work in the College Class: Advantages, Challenges, and Outcomes

Presenters: Laura Coghlan and Jennifer Rodriguez

Office of Institutional Research & Assessment
The Evergreen State College
May 2013



Part I: Framing

NSSE Active and Collaborative Learning Benchmark

The NSSE Institutional Benchmark Report speaks to the importance of collaborative learning:

“Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students for the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college.”

AACU/LEAP: Essential Learning Outcomes

Twelve ELOs, including:

- Teamwork and problem solving
- Intercultural knowledge and competence

Evergreen Foci and Expectations

(2 of) Five Foci

- Learning Across Significant Differences
- Collaborative Learning

Expectations of Evergreen Graduates

- Participate collaboratively and responsibly in our diverse society

Employer-Valued Skills

AACU-National most valued in new hires (2006)

- Teamwork and ability to collaborate in a diverse group

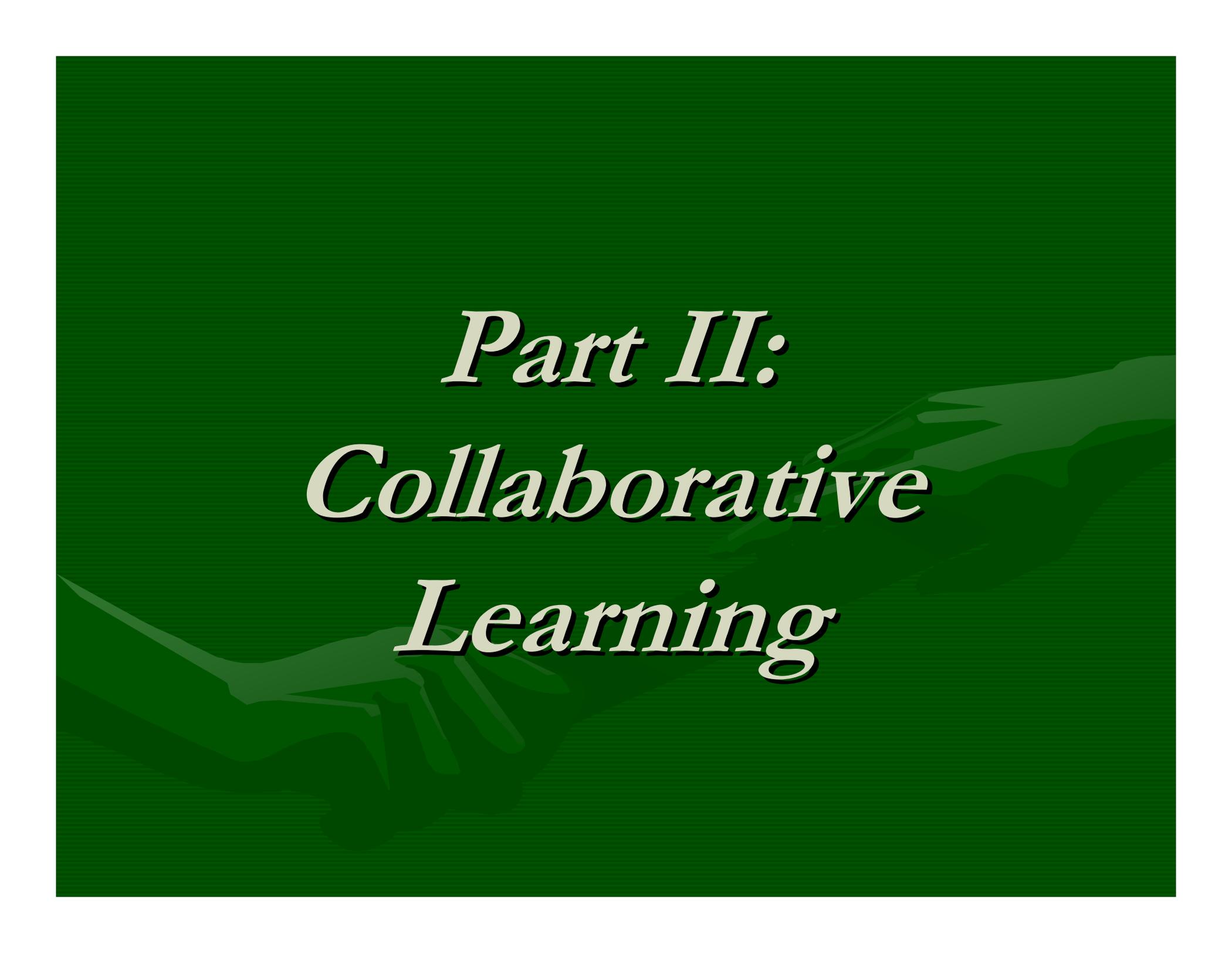
Employers of Evergreen alumni rated importance of skill to alumni job (2011):

- #1 Working collaboratively in a group
- #6 Ability to work in a culturally diverse environment (alumni skill level rated #1)

AACU/LEAP: Essential Learning Outcomes

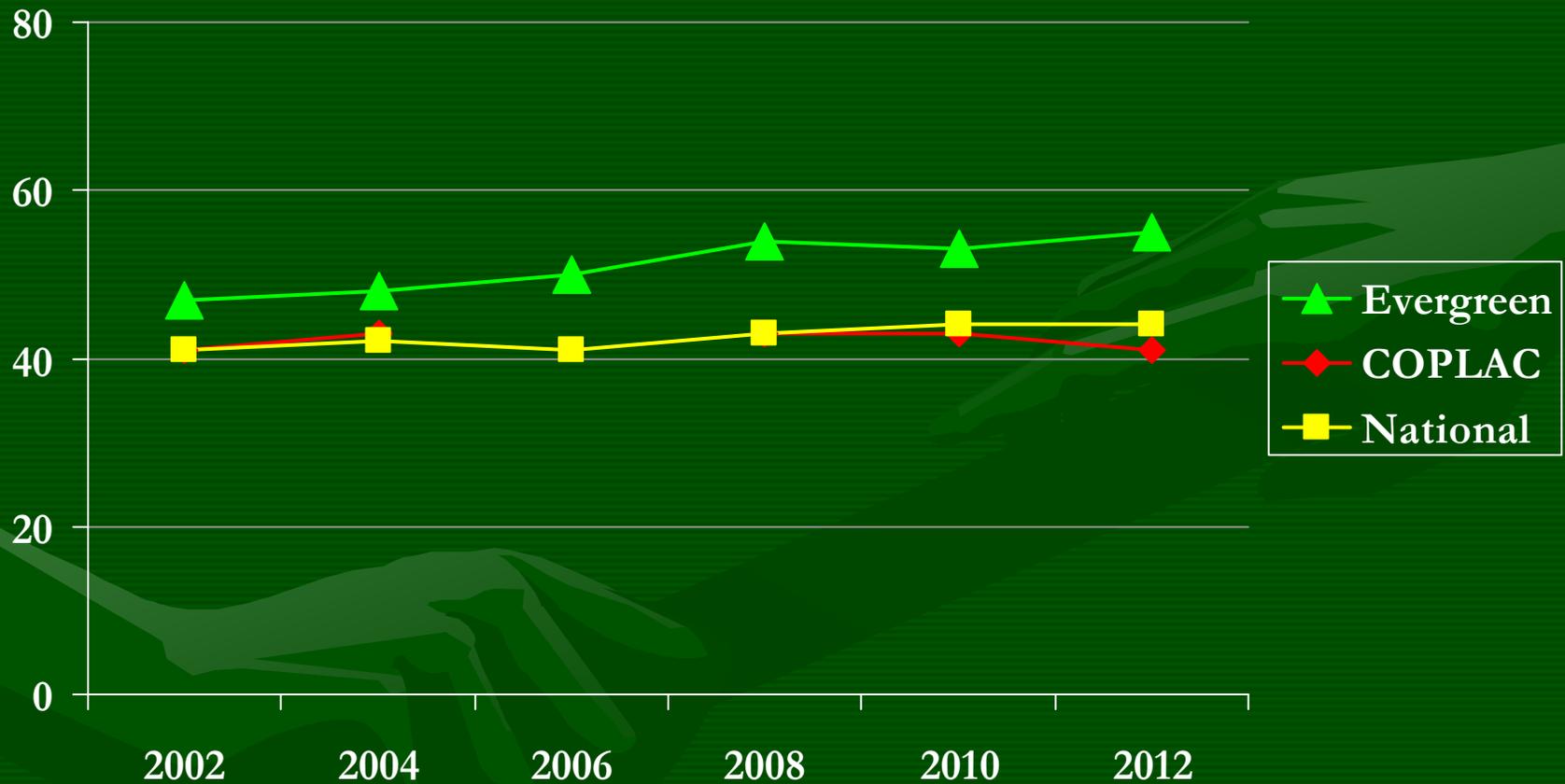
71% of employers want more emphasis on:

- Teamwork skills in diverse groups
- Intercultural competence



Part II:
Collaborative
Learning

First-Year Benchmark: Active & Collaborative Learning



NSSE: Combined responses of Very Often and Often

First-Year Students		2008	2010	2012
Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	Evergreen	78%	77%	79%
	National	60%	62%	63%
Worked with other students on projects during class	Evergreen	64%	65%	68%
	National	42%	45%	45%
Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	Evergreen	62%	67%	63%
	National	44%	46%	47%

Senior Benchmark: Active & Collaborative Learning



NSSE: Combined responses of Very Often and Often

Seniors		2008	2010	2012
Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	Evergreen	87%	82%	86%
	National	73%	74%	76%
Worked with other students on projects during class	Evergreen	69%	69%	69%
	National	46%	49%	50%
Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	Evergreen	64%	70%	66%
	National	59%	61%	60%

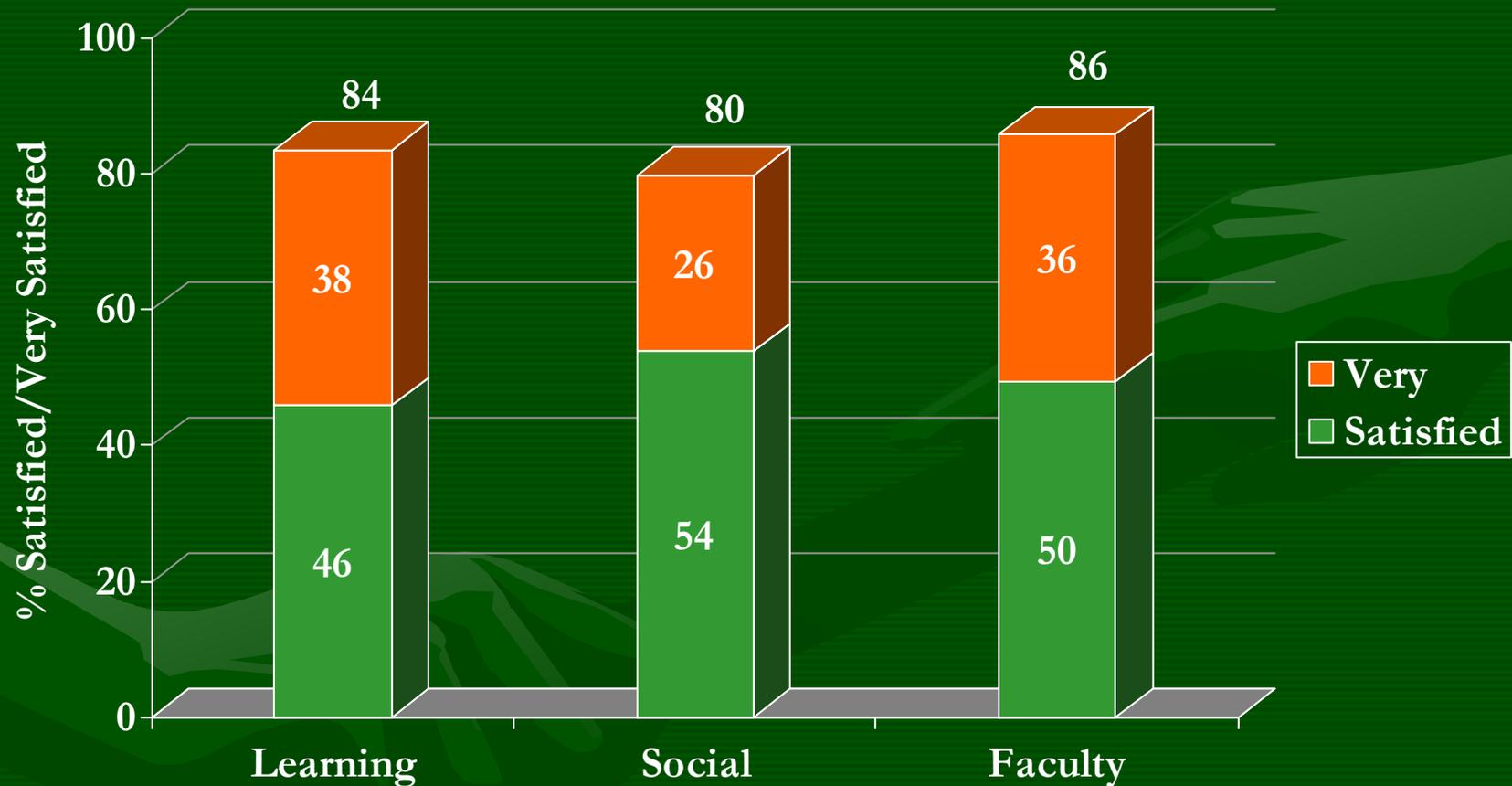
Student Satisfaction: Group Projects and Other Peer Collaborations



“The emphasis on collaborative work was difficult, especially when other students did not do their fair share of work. I often felt like I had to do **more than my fair share** in order to make sure projects and assignments got done. This made me feel like I was burdened with more work than what my academic credits reflected.”

“I feel that there should be **mandatory workshops on how to work effectively in groups**. I feel that group work is the heart and soul of the TESC experience and that leaving it all to trial and error could cause more grief and dropout than is necessary.”

Student Satisfaction with Seminar



“In seminar, people would bring in outside ideas that related to the seminar topic...people used their own backgrounds to relate information or pose something in a **new light or perspective**, allowing for new, (at least different), understanding. Seminar created a giant mesh of things.”

“In our class we have a lot of reading and writing and essays and things like that. But several times a week we get together in either small groups or the class as a whole, and we do seminars on what we read or what we wrote down, and I think that that’s really interesting, and it gets everyone’s opinion out there. It’s regulated, so people aren’t attacking each other. But it really helps you learn new things and to see other people’s perspectives, so I think that’s really useful.”

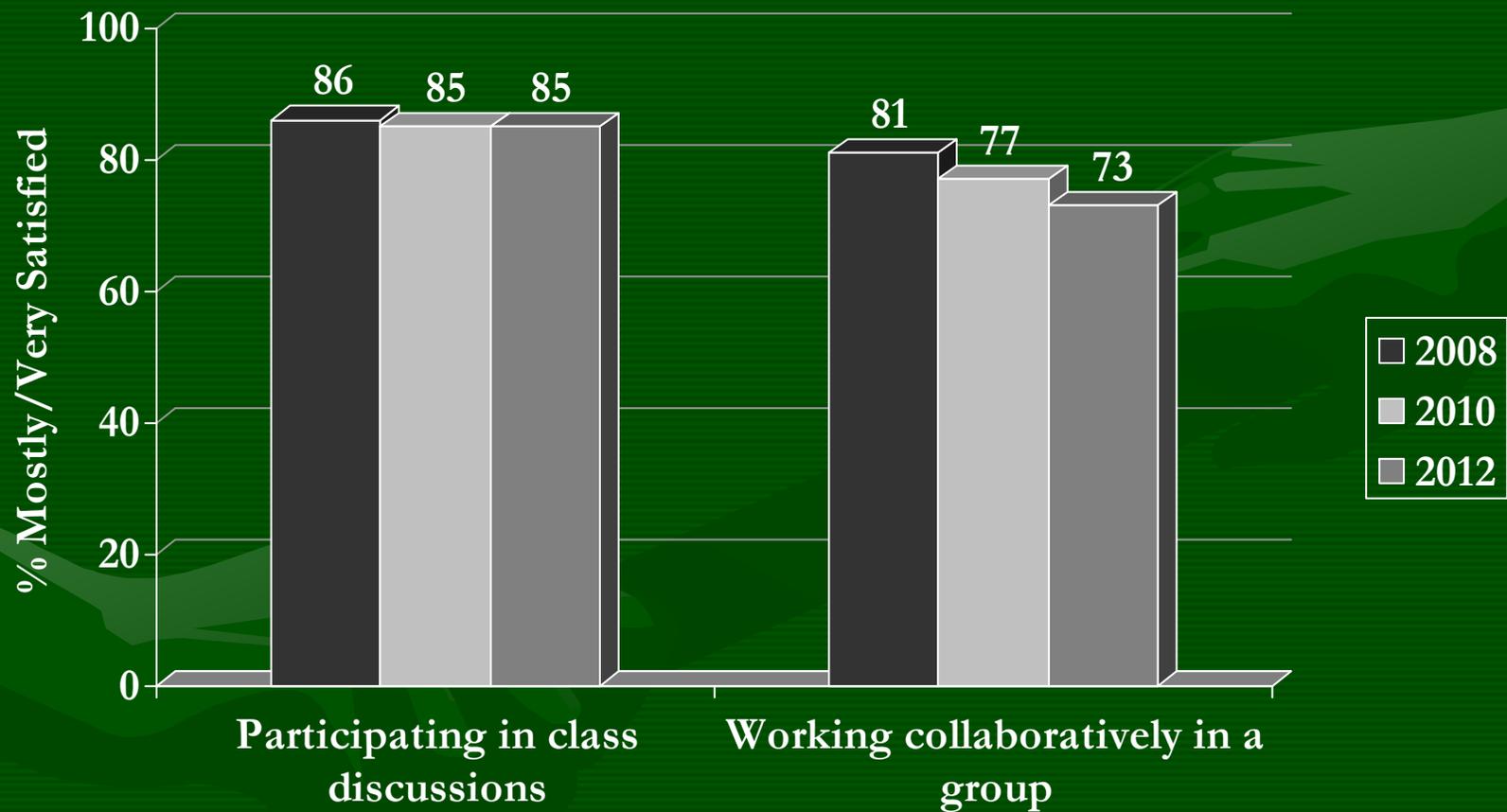
“I was a quieter voice, and forcing myself to speak during seminar amongst **dominating voices** never eased nor improved my speaking skill-set whatsoever. [...] With some moderation, seminars and class discussions could be positive experience for those of us that require a moment of breathing room for our responses.”

Alumni Satisfaction: Quality of Learning Interaction with Other Students



“I’ve learned a lot from my classmates. And that’s the experience of the group. It can be frustrating. Groups can be frustrating. At first I didn’t like it, but I understand why they do it. I see what comes of it, the end result. Sometimes the journey’s kind of rough, but the end result is cool.”

Satisfaction with Evergreen's Contribution to Growth



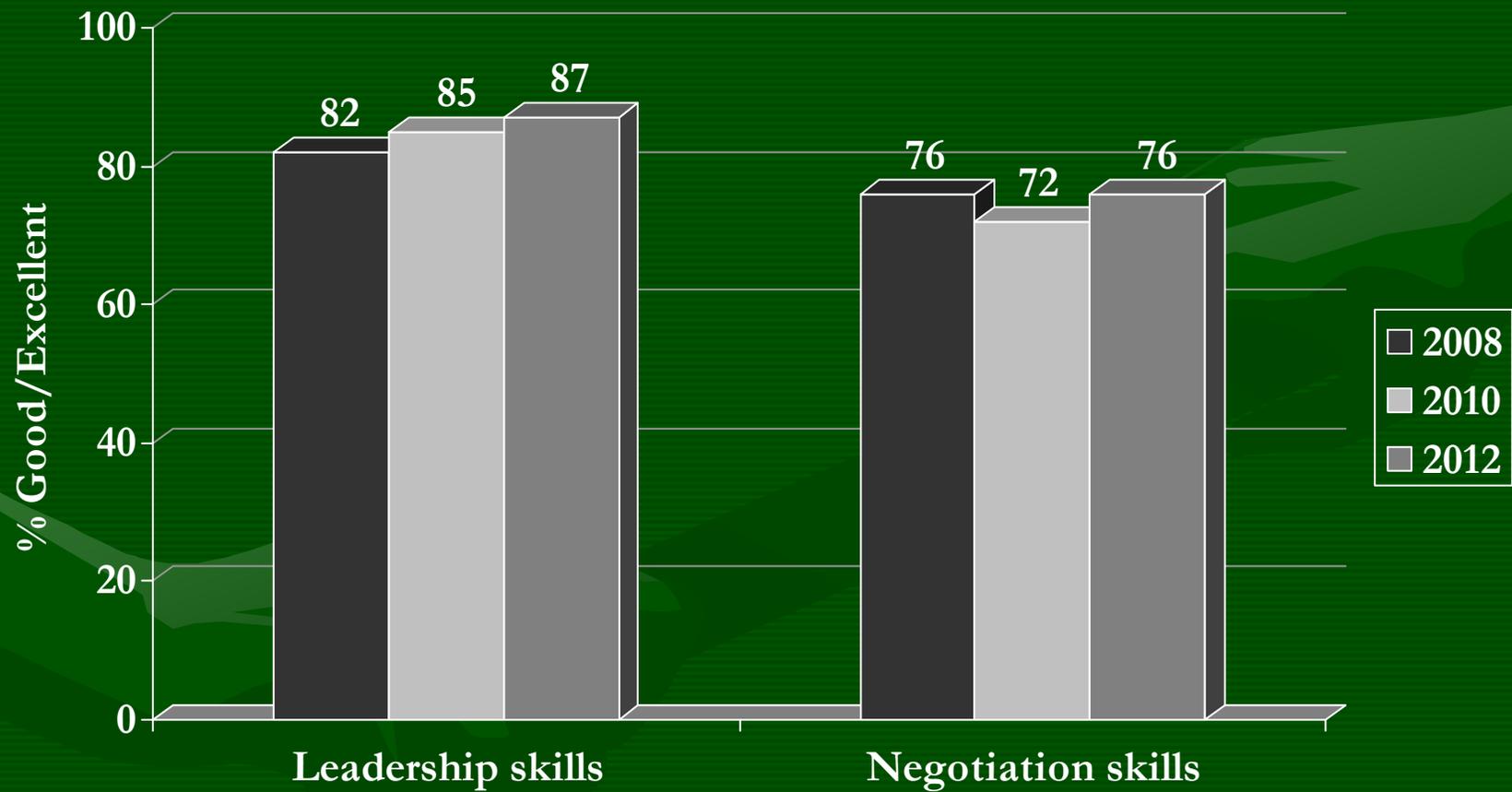
“Assertiveness and diplomacy...sometimes the group work at Evergreen got overrun by people I would sometimes consider bullies and it was hard to negotiate among the students. I guess **setting ground rules and boundaries** for self and others, communicating needs and respecting others’.”

“As a volunteer, one has to be willing to not be in charge, and still invest conceptually in projects.

Evergreen gave me so many opportunities to work in groups and in seminars where I learned how to listen to and work with other people on their ideas, even if they were opposite from my own.

Those habits of humility and patience absolutely served me when I volunteered with organizations where I was on the bottom rung and disagreed with how things were running. My time at Evergreen showed me how much I can learn from others.”

Alumni Level of Skill



“Tolerance of others. In seminar we as students were frequently bored by one or two outspoken and self-aggrandizing, ego driven-person who was convinced of his or her mastery of whatever we were talking about. Often times this person had an inflexible mind and was unable to imaginably appreciate the point of view of another person.

(Full disclosure: sometimes this was me.) In these circumstances a person learns patience, humility, incisive wit, and techniques to passively influence others.”

*Part III: Interactions
Across Differences*



NSSE: Combined Responses of Very Often and Often

First-Year Students		2008	2010	2012
Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity	Evergreen	62%	69%	74%
	National	52%	52%	53%
Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values	Evergreen	69%	68%	73%
	National	56%	56%	55%

NSSE: Combined Responses of Very Often and Often

Seniors		2008	2010	2012
Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity	Evergreen	66%	59%	65%
	National	53%	54%	54%
Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values	Evergreen	66%	62%	69%
	National	56%	56%	56%

“Having discussions about **race** in seminar as a white person was really discomfoting. If I tried to speak up I was shut down by people of color as not understanding the issues because of my privilege. And that is exactly opposite of what we were trying to achieve.”

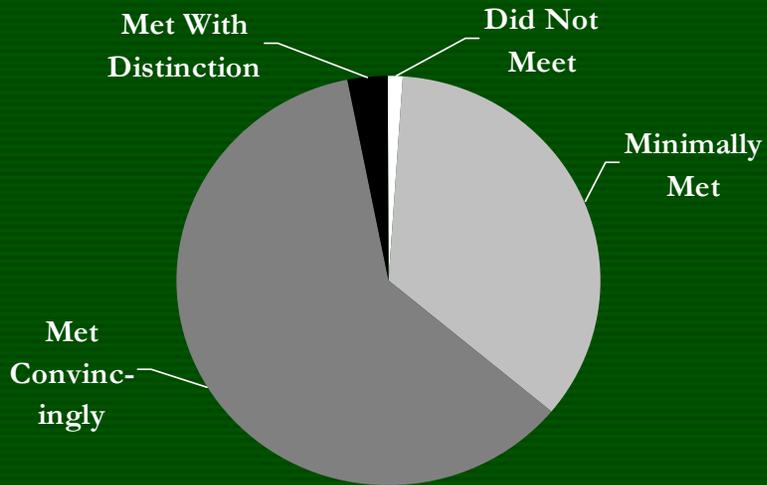
“I feel that students who have different backgrounds than the majority of students (especially students of color) are often forced to be **representatives** of all people who have that background, and are often asked to educate the other students about that background. This can make people very uncomfortable, and the other students/faculty don't even acknowledge that.”

Alumni Satisfaction: Respect Shown for Different or Opposing Viewpoints

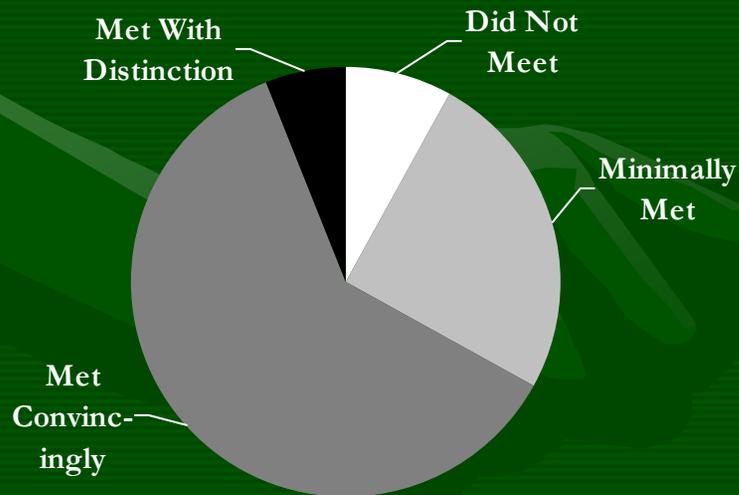


“I wish Evergreen would incorporate more communication skills into its programs. Students learn about many **controversial or potentially inflammatory topics** (i.e. feminism, environmental studies, radical politics, etc.) but often lack the skills to effectively communicate their views, and the knowledge they acquired, with people who do not share that view. It’s easy to pass judgment or communicate too harshly, so that the listener is turned off. Evergreen needs to work on that.”

Evidence Students Met Expectations

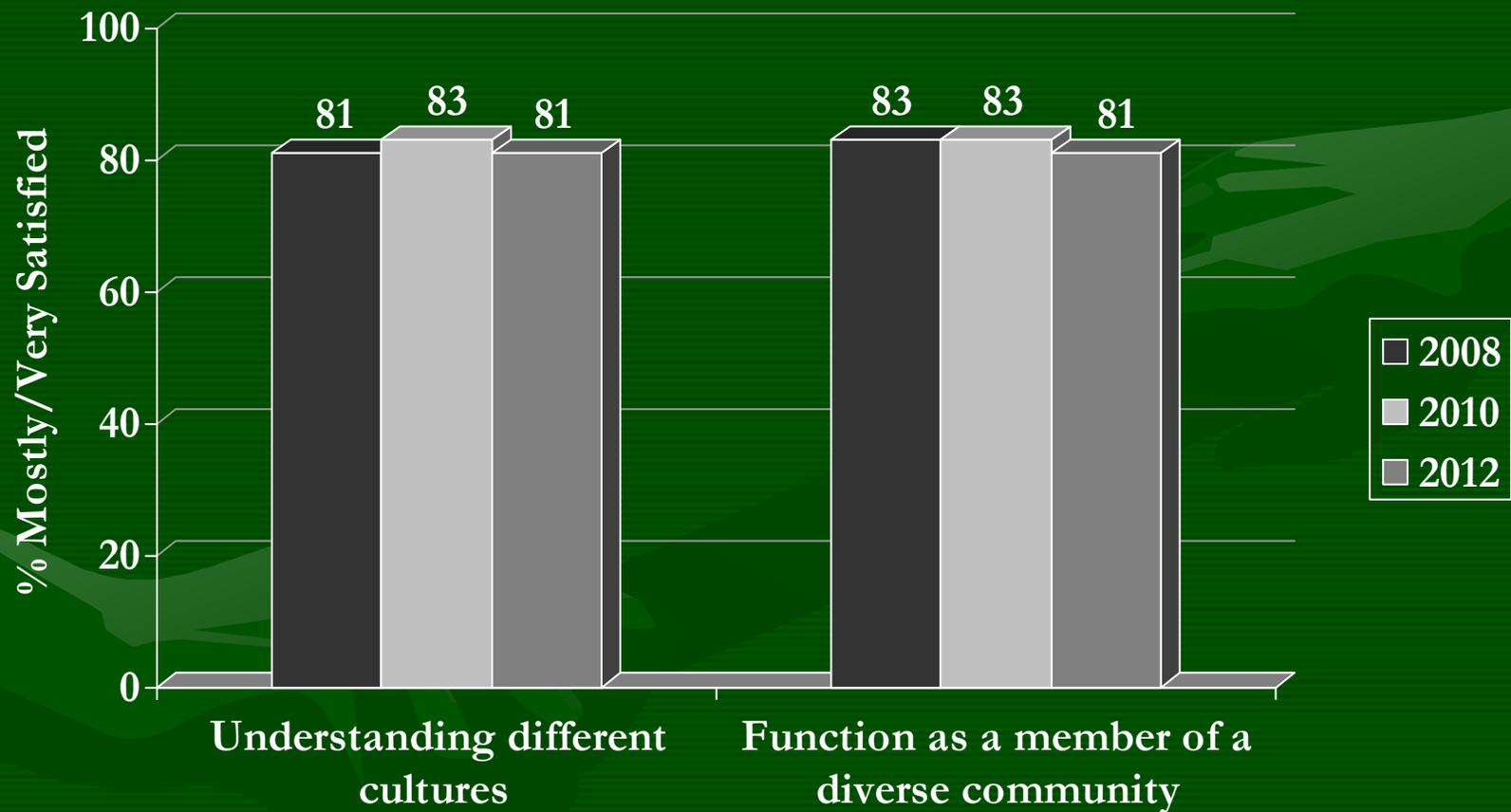


- Participate collaboratively & responsibly
(64% met convincingly)



- Participate in our diverse society
(67% met convincingly)

Satisfaction with Evergreen's Contribution to Growth



“I have the ability to work with diverse groups to obtain core objectives, meet deadlines, and have the ability to empathize and relate to individuals. I also have the ability to quickly and efficiently work with people of differing backgrounds and cultures to accomplish common objectives, and I am confident in my skills as a clear and capable orator, especially when working in a team.”

NSSE: Combined Responses of Very Often and Often

First-Year Students		2008	2010	2012
Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue	Evergreen	84%	78%	74%
	National	53%	54%	54%
Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective	Evergreen	84%	80%	84%
	National	61%	63%	63%
Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept	Evergreen	87%	79%	87%
	National	65%	67%	67%

NSSE: Combined Responses of Very Often and Often

Seniors		2008	2010	2012
Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue	Evergreen	76%	77%	79%
	National	57%	59%	59%
Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective	Evergreen	82%	79%	82%
	National	65%	67%	68%
Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept	Evergreen	83%	81%	84%
	National	67%	69%	70%

“I think the group process or group projects are a huge learning experience. Both in regards to content, but then also just like relating to the community and how to find strengths in everybody and how we can work together. I think you learn a lot about the people around you, but then also you learn a lot about yourself.



*Part IV: Strategies
for Successful
Collaboration*

Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue	Debate
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other position.	In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.
In dialogue finding common ground is the goal.	In debate winning is the goal.
Dialogue complicates positions and issues.	Debate simplifies positions and issues.

“As usual, there were quiet students and very vocal students. The vocal students, driven by their new-to-Evergreen enthusiasm, stumbled significantly over each other in this first seminar and tended to forget to watch for body language of others who might want to speak. This, despite the fact that the group had studied a "Dialogue vs. Debate" chart that I distributed and set forth the idea that **"Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer, and that together they can put them into a workable answer."** In short debriefing, they recognized the difficulty of collaborative discussion and the need to develop skills in it.”

“We talked quite a bit about the role of personal experience in a seminar and the need to seek collective understanding of complex issues, not to argue out sides of an issue or **hold others responsible for representing views or identities that we want to attach to them.**”

“I handed out "They say, I Say," and they read it to prepare for seminar. **We discussed ways of working with diversity, and different personality and learning styles in seminar.** We came up with a list of ideas and ideals about good seminar strategies.”

“Characteristics of a successful book seminar:
Complete the book, link your comments to those who went before when possible by referencing specific comments made earlier by your peers, listen actively, learn from diversity of opinions, etc.”

“Once I opened the forum for discussing our common text, [...] one of the students immediately diverted our group's attention away from the text and towards a simple discussion of opinion. I was able to intervene and bring the discussion back to the text at hand, and remind people that **"seminar"** is not simply a free-for-all, but is, in fact, a self-disciplined consideration of a text, offered as a starting point for deep discussion and learning.”

“I introduced the concept of seminar, seminar skills, and the **"Difficult Conversations"** philosophies: stay engaged, get comfortable with discomfort, speak your truth, don't expect closure.”

“I feel like things, after probably the first week in fall quarter, the material we were dealing with stopped being controversial. We just developed a sort mutual understanding within the class that this is a communal effort... and we thus have to be very patient with each other. I think that maybe humility is what I'm trying to get at. The more communal, relational approach that we took to this inquiry allowed us to develop our own understandings as individuals, but also bounce that off our classmates constantly and be vulnerable with each other ... and thus develop even more.”



*Part V: Discussion
and Practice
Sharing*

“Free-write / Pre-write”

1. What are some strategies you have used that have been successful in creating collaborative learning environments?
2. Can you think of a particularly challenging situation you have encountered while working with students in groups? Are there areas in which you wish you had new ideas or approaches?



Strategies for Successful Collaborative Learning:

- **Begin with an ice breaker** (establish sense of community/trust)
- **Establish group covenant or guidelines**
- **Clarify expectations**
- **Facilitate to stay on track**
- **Be prepared/responsible for own work**
- **Practice attentive/active listening**
- **Evaluate process**
- **Keep re-mixing groups, create new combinations to enable new interactions**
- **Address conflict**
- **Leave time for giveback** (e.g., acknowledge contributions of others, round robin, “take-aways,” etc.)

Additional strategies I learned about in this session:

(Transcribed from workshop discussion)

- Minority view (religion) – student afraid to speak out
- State explicitly – “I will respect you as a person, even if I disagree with your perspective”
- Hard to maintain safety – try to establish early on – this is an academic community, not a forum for converting people to your ideology
- Online learning environment – cover of anonymity – use for good!
- Faculty model – What can I learn from your beliefs? (No correct position)
- Separation of knowledge from personal/cultural associations – student hesitant to express opinion to instructor (authority figure) and uncomfortable with opposition/disagreement as culture highly values harmony
- Reflection piece – What is one belief you came with? And left with?
- “Look, Listen, ... Speak” method (Have students give examples of when they looked/listened)
- Learn to read body language (waiting to speak, response to what is being said)
- Before you speak, reflect what previous person said
- Particularly on long-term projects, may need to “jump start”/reinvigorate less active members
- Do an initial assessment – What are your strengths? Are there areas in which you might need help from the group? Follow up later, i.e., mid-quarter reflection.
- Bush/Obama example – had to step back, not take sides – felt untrue to self, but had to let student I disagreed with have his/her say
- Creating space for quiet students – have them think/write about discussion points ahead of time (mental preparation)
- “We all want to learn from each other” example – Online posting as an option for shy students
- Organize groups by skill level/best fit
- Leave quiet space between comments to make conversation more accessible
- TED Talk – *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*
http://www.ted.com/talks/susan_cain_the_power_of_introverts.html