FORUM

WAKE-UP CALL

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If there is any extra-curricular reading that should soon be on every Oakland University faculty member's agenda, it is the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment's "What Students Are Telling Us About Their OU Experience: Results from the NSSE Survey." First unveiled just before the holiday break by OIRA Director Laura Schartman to an increasingly somber audience of faculty and administrators, and now on-line at the OIRA home page, the NSSE Survey raises serious questions as to whether Oakland offers the "instructional programs of high quality" that it claims as part of its mission to provide. It also makes one ask whether the university will meet 2020 goal of delivering "high quality and challenging undergraduate education" by an "inspired faculty" that is "driven by . . . dedication . . . to the teaching-learning process." And it suggests that we've all got some serious work to do if the similarly lofty instructional goals of 2020 are to be met.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) grew out of a 1998 initiative by the Pew Charitable Trusts aimed at studying "the investments that institutions make to foster proven instructional practices and the kinds of activities, experiences and outcomes that their students receive as a result" (see the NSSE home page <nsse.iub.edu> on the origins

of the study). An amalgam of the Indiana Center for Postsecondary Research, the Indiana University Center for Survey Research and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, was eventually formed to administer the survey so as to ensure that this would be done by a "credible third-party survey organization" not associated with either the mass media or the "existing accountability structure of colleges and universities," i.e., the accreditation boards, etc. (NSSE home page).

One central conclusion of the NSSE over the years is that "the degree to which students are engaged in their studies impacts directly on the quality of student learning and their overall educational experience." Thus, "characteristics of student involvement can serve as a proxy for quality" (NSSE home page). Put differently, the NSSE is a "college student survey that assesses the extent to which students engage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development" (quotes from the on-line study narrative). It focuses on "the ways that [institutions] can shape their academic, interpersonal and extracurricular offerings to encourage *student engagement*" (emphasis in original), by which is meant the "time and energy [students devote] to educationally purposeful activities" and the kinds of "effective institutional practices" that institutions use "to induce students to do the right things."

Just over a third of the 4,800 Oakland students invited to participate in NSSE's 2007 survey responded, a response rate roughly matching that of the overall national survey. The study focuses comparatively on first year students and seniors only. The OIRA report includes longitudinal NSSE data from 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2007, and in it OU student responses are variously compared with those of "selected peer," Carnegie, NSSE and the "top 50" national institutions. The OIRA's overall conclusions are summarized in a series of graphic presentations, but pages of data tables are provided for anyone wishing to explore the study in great depth.

The NSSE identifies, and reports student responses to

questions measuring institutional performance on five key indicators of "effective educational practice:" the level of "academic challenge" (LAC) students experience, the degree to which they are involved in "active and collaborative learning" (ACL), the extent of "student-faculty interaction" (SFI), how much in the way of "enriching educational experiences"(EEE) institutions provide, and how "supportive" students feel their "campus environment" (SCE) to be. The OIRA study presents graphic data generated from the NSSE to compare summarily Oakland's performance on these five indicators with selected peer, Carnegie, overall NSSE and "Top 50%" institutions. It first presents overall benchmark comparisons for each of the five variables, then following up with graphic data from several illustrative questionnaire items.

From an Oakland faculty member's perspective, the overall benchmark data are startling; they show Oakland typically trails the other institutions by 2–3 points on most measures. The benchmark data tend, perhaps, to exaggerate the differences when one looks at the actual NSSE 2007 mean comparison tables that are also provided. Nonetheless, ***the ineluctable conclusion one draws from the study is that Oakland is at mean or often below the mean in performance on most indicators in*** comparison with the other institutions in all categories. Thus, for example, Oakland's LAC scores "are close to the means for many items, but . . . low on objective measures of student effort, e.g. number of papers written, reading assignments and hour spent studying." "There are no 'high performance areas'" in the AIC area, reports the study, and the data for the "student-faculty interaction" area are especially disturbing. Our first year students, especially, report lower levels of faculty feedback, for example, and we score below the mean on most indicators of working with students outside of class on research or other projects. Asked to rate their faculty on a scale from "unavailable, unhelpful" to "available, helpful," both first year students and seniors gave us lower scores than others did at their faculties at comparison institutions. Oakland compares more favorably with its selected peer institutions in providing "enriching edu-

cational experiences," but other than in its offerings in foreign language coursework, it does not rank high on the performance items measured in this area and visibly lags behind in some of them. Measures of the supportiveness of our overall campus environment came in lower as well; low scores on items related to relationships with faculty and staff are especially worthy of note. The last two questions in the survey instrument asked students, on a scale of 1 low to 4 high, to "evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution," and whether, if they had it to do over, they would "go to the same institution you are now attending." OU student responses to both questions hover a tad lower below the mean score of 3 ("good") than students elsewhere tended to give their schools.

One should stress, however, that Oakland's scores on most items are at or just slightly close to the mean, and in most cases the differences are not statistically significant. It is not, therefore, that we are performing at seriously lower level than our peer and other institutions nationally. But these results are clearly not consistent with the claims we make and the aspirations we have to provide a superior, high quality and distinctive educational experience. Moreover, the wide-ranging NSSE study touches on many student behaviors that are not easily amenable to change by institutional practices and faculty instructional efforts. The OIRA study makes a point of showing the astoundingly greater amount of time that OU students, both first year and senior, spend working off campus for pay than do students at our peer institutions. That fact presents Oakland faculty with a particularly unusual challenge in improving student engagement in the learning process. But it is clear that we as a faculty can do more to move our overall instructional performance to a level closer the ideals we profess and to which we aspire. I would recommend that all units place collective deliberation on the OIRA report and NSSE data on their agenda some time soon. And perhaps the Teaching and Learning Committee can exercise some leadership as well in helping us assess the meaning of these results and what steps we can take to ameliorate them.