

# The Status of Student Learning in the General Education Program:

## A Report Submitted to the St. Ambrose Community

*Spring 1997*

**Respectfully submitted,**

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### **Executive Summary**

The General Education Assessment Committee spent the past two years assessing student learning in the General Education Program at St. Ambrose. Instruments used to assess learning included, but were not limited to: the Academic Profile, Student and Faculty General Education Surveys, the HERI College Student Survey, and the College Student Experience Questionnaire. Based on an examination of this evidence, our overall conclusion is that the General Education Program at St. Ambrose appears to be accomplishing the goals of the program, with some notable areas of strengths and weaknesses which are outlined below.

In general, students appear to be learning the content (Understanding/Content area goals) of the material in their general education courses as well as students from other comparable liberal arts institutions (see results of the Academic Profile). Based on institutional surveys, the weakest area among the content areas specified in the Mission, Goals, and Philosophy of the General Education Program appears to be

## Modern Languages.

There are several areas within the Skill area goals where we are doing an adequate or good job of providing our students the skills necessary to succeed in the future. These areas of strength appear to be in written communication, interpersonal skills, collaborative skills, critical thinking skills, and health and recreation skills. Areas of concern within the Skill area goals are oral communication, mathematical reasoning skills, computer literacy, and library skills.

We appear to be doing an adequate job among the Attitude/Value goal areas, especially in developing respect for differences, a sense of freedom of inquiry and dissent, a sense of justice and equality, and values of caring service, and community responsibility. An area that needs to be examined more closely is development of an aesthetic sense - this appeared to be the weakest area among the Attitude/Values goal areas.

Finally, a minority of both faculty and students felt that the General Education Program "helped to build recognition of the relationships among the courses ... [students took], and helped to build recognition of the connection and application of this learning to the present and future context of ... [students'] lives." Faculty and students were more likely to see general education courses as "independent hurdles to overcome for graduation" or "loosely connected sets of courses that attempted to broaden students' education." This area should be examined more closely to determine ways of enhancing the cohesiveness of the General Education Program to assist students in seeing the interconnectedness of their coursework.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The St. Ambrose University General Education Assessment Committee makes the following recommendation:

That a committee should be appointed under the direction of the Director of General Education to more fully examine the implications of this report. Voting membership should include members from the following departments/disciplines: Philosophy, Theology, English, Modern Languages, Speech, Fine Arts, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, History, Health and Physical Education, an at-large member from each of the three academic colleges, and a student member from each of the three academic colleges. In addition, input should be sought from the following areas, among others, as needed: Admissions, the Director of the New Student Seminar program, the Office of Records and Registration, the Director of the Writing Across the Curriculum program, ACCEL, and Graduate and Continuing Education.

The mission of this committee will be to more fully examine the implications of this report and to make recommendations to the faculty concerning improvements to the General Education Program that will remedy any apparent weaknesses. This committee should be chosen by the end of the spring 1997 semester and commence meeting early in the fall 1997 semester.

## Introduction

A General Education Assessment Task Force was appointed by the Provost in the fall of 1992. During the next two years, the Task Force developed a Mission, Goals, and Philosophy Statement (see p. 22 of the *1995 Academic Assessment Plan*) and an Assessment Plan (see pp. 24, 26-28 of the *1995 Academic Assessment Plan*) for the General Education Program.

As a result of the work of the General Education Assessment Task Force, a request for funding through an Action Plan was submitted to the 1994-1995 University-Wide Planning Committee. This request received partial funding for the 1995-96 academic year with continued funding provided for the 1996-97 academic year. The plan delegated responsibility for General Education Program assessment and direction to a Director of General Education. A Director of General Education was appointed fall 1995. A General Education Assessment Committee was appointed by the Director of General Education spring 1996 in consultation with the deans of the three academic colleges. The committee is currently made up of the following individuals:

Director of General Education: Dr. Paul Koch

College of Arts and Sciences: Dr. Michael Halstead, Dr. Beatrice Jacobson, Dr. Richard

Legg, Ms. Barbara Muenster

College of Business: Ms. Allison Ambrose, Dr. Linda Brown

College of Human Services: Mr. Ken Colwell, Ms. Kathleen Zajicek.

[Thanks are expressed to Dr. Dean Marple and Mr. Jim Mullins for past service to the committee.]

### General Education Assessment Committee Mission

The mission of the General Education Assessment Committee is to study assessment evidence to learn what it reveals about student accomplishment of the General Education goals. When evidence documents areas of weakness in student learning of the goals, the Committee [or another appointed committee] will develop recommendations for program improvements. These proposals will be brought to the Educational Policies Committee for consideration. If the approved program changes require new funds, the Director of General Education will work with the Provost to develop an action plan to submit for consideration by the University-Wide Planning Committee. Recommendations for major program changes will be brought before the entire faculty through forums and/or the Faculty Assembly.

### General Assessment Methodology

As indicated in the *1995 Academic Assessment Plan*, a multi-method approach to assessing the current status of the General Education Program was recommended by the original General Education Assessment Task Force; this approach was used with some modifications. Such an approach, in combination with contacting as many relevant members of the St. Ambrose Community as possible, was used to enhance the reliability and validity of the overall assessment. Information on the reliability and validity of the individual assessment instruments is available in an expanded assessment document on reserve in the library and from the Director of General Education.

It is essential to remember that assessment is an ongoing process, and that information contained in this report is only a "snapshot" based on current data. Assessment of General Education at St. Ambrose will continue as possible changes are considered for the General Education Program and into the foreseeable future.

One group is noticeably missing from the current assessment - alumni. An alumni survey was prepared and 50 copies along with stamped self-addressed return envelopes were provided to the Director of Alumni Relations for distribution to alumni. Of the surveys sent out, only one was returned to the Director of General Education and was not included in any analysis.

### College Student Experience Questionnaire

The College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) was piloted with a group of December, 1996 graduates. The purpose of the CSEQ is to learn more about how students spend their time - in course work, in the library, in contacts with faculty, in extracurricular activities, in various social and cultural activities, and in using other facilities and opportunities that exist on the college campus. The CSEQ is composed of 189 questions in the following areas: background information; college activities (library experience; experiences with faculty; course learning; art, music, theater; clubs and organizations, experiences in writing, personal experiences, student acquaintances, science, and campus residence); conversations (topics of conversation and information in conversations); reading, writing; opinions about college; the college environment; and estimate of gains. The CSEQ takes a student approximately 30 m to complete.

The students in the December, 1996 graduating class who were not chosen to participate in the Academic Profile ( $n = 50$ ) were mailed the CSEQ with a stamped self-addressed return envelope. Students were give approximately two weeks to complete and return the survey to the Director of General Education. Thirty-one students returned the survey. Because of the smaller-than-expected rate of return and a possibly biased sample, these data were not included in the Assessment Summary which follows. These data are available in a summarized form on reserve in the library or from the Director of General Education. A complete report of these data is available from the Director of General Education.

## **General Summary**

The following information summarizes the general results of the assessment for each of the goals and

objectives identified for the General Education Program. More detailed information on the assessment instruments, methodology, and results is available in an expanded assessment document on reserve in the library and from the Director of General Education.

**SKILL ("Do")** Knowledge expressed by action, tools, practice, implementing.

### *Written Communication*

All students are required to demonstrate proficiency in English composition by passing English 101 (Written Communication) or an equivalent with a grade of C or above. In addition, all students must pass, with a C or better, two Writing Intensive courses. One Writing Intensive course can be at any level in any department, and one must be at the 300- or 400-level in the declared major.

Results of the Academic Profile indicated that students at St. Ambrose had a mean score of 117 on the College Level Writing Skills Dimension Subscore. This is comparable to the comparison Liberal Arts Colleges ( $n=62$ ) which collectively had a mean score of  $117.5 \pm 2.6$  ( $\pm$  standard deviation). Criterion-referenced scores in writing on the Academic Profile indicated that 8% of the students tested did not reach Level 1, 46% reached Level 1, 28% reached Level 2, and 18% reached Level 3. It is the feeling of the General Education Assessment Committee that Level 1 could be loosely translated as a "C" grade, Level 2 as a "B" grade, and Level 1 as an "A" grade (see expanded assessment document for a complete description of these criterion-referenced scores).

Faculty (and students) were asked to respond to a description of a skill (e.g., "The written communication skills that students gain in *general education courses* at St. Ambrose prepare them [students] to write effectively in their chosen career.") on a scale from 1 - Strongly Disagree to 9 - Strongly Agree. Mean scores for the *eighteen* skills descriptions were calculated and ordered from largest to smallest. Larger mean scores tended toward the "Strongly Agree" end of the continuum and smaller mean scores tended toward the "Strongly Disagree" end of the continuum. The largest mean score was assigned a rank of "1," indicating strongest agreement with the description. On the Institutional Faculty Survey (IFS), faculty ranked the ability to write effectively in their chosen career 13th and the ability to write effectively in everyday life was ranked 8th. On the Institutional Student Survey (ISS), four-year St. Ambrose students ranked the ability to write effectively in their chosen career 10th, while transfer students ranked this ability 5th. Four-year St. Ambrose students ranked the ability to write effectively in everyday life 6th, while transfer students ranked this ability 1st.

Results of a Writing Intensive Survey collated by the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum revealed that 7 out of 21 faculty felt that students' writing was much better, 12.5 out of 21 faculty felt that students' writing was somewhat better, and 1.5 out of 21 faculty felt that students' writing was about the same after taking a writing intensive class than when they entered the class.

In sum, given that St. Ambrose only requires a C or better grade in writing-related courses, there is relatively consistent agreement among the assessment techniques that we do an adequate job in teaching

written communication skills to our students.

### *Oral Communication*

All students are required to demonstrate proficiency in public speaking by fulfilling specific requirements at St. Ambrose University (Speech 101 - Principles of Public Speaking is the option taken by most students).

On the IFS, faculty ranked the ability to speak effectively in their chosen career 14th, the ability to speak effectively in everyday life was ranked 9th, the ability to give a formal presentation was ranked 1st, and the ability to give an informal presentation was ranked 2nd. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked the ability to speak effectively in their chosen career 8th, while transfer students ranked this ability 11th. Four year St. Ambrose students ranked the ability to speak effectively in everyday life 4th, while transfer students ranked this ability 9th. Four-year St. Ambrose students ranked the ability to give a formal presentation 1st, while transfer students ranked this ability 10th. Four-year St. Ambrose students ranked the ability to give an informal presentation 9th, while transfer students ranked this ability 15th.

Results of an *informal* "Speaking in the St. Ambrose Classroom Faculty Survey" distributed by campus e-mail revealed that, of the 55 faculty responding, oral communication is an important skill to be developed in students. A significant percentage of faculty require students to present their ideas orally in class (94.5%) and formal presentations (76.4%). While these data indicate that oral communication is an important skill, 78.2% of the respondents judged the quality of oral presentations to be only somewhat effective, 10.9% judged the presentations as very effective, and 5.5% judged the presentations as ineffective. While a fair number of the respondents in this survey indicated that they provide some instruction in effective oral communication (41.8%), most do not (52.7%).

While students appear to feel comfortable about their speaking ability, faculty feel less comfortable. This is especially true about students' ability to speak in their chosen career. In addition, over 80% of the faculty responding to the informal speaking survey indicated that classroom presentations were only somewhat effective or ineffective.

*Interpersonal Skills and Collaborative Skills* (The analysis of these skills is combined as there appeared to be some overlap in the instruments that addressed these skills.)

On the IFS, faculty ranked enhanced interpersonal skills 5th and increased collaborative skills 4th. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked enhanced interpersonal skills 5th and increased collaborative skills 2nd, while transfer students ranked enhanced interpersonal skills 7th and increased interpersonal skills 3rd. There appears to be consistent agreement that the General Education curriculum enhances skills in these areas.

### *Mathematical Reasoning Skills*

All students are required to demonstrate proficiency in mathematics by passing Mathematics 110 (Math for the Liberal Arts) or Mathematics 121 (Intermediate Algebra) with a grade of C or above, or an equivalent course.

Results of the Academic Profile indicated that students at St. Ambrose had a mean score of 117 on the Using Mathematical Data Skills Dimension Subscore. This is comparable to the comparison Liberal Arts Colleges ( $n=62$ ) which collectively had a mean score of  $115.6 \pm 3.0$  ( $\pm$  standard deviation). Criterion-referenced scores in math on the Academic Profile indicated that 14% of the students tested did not reach Level 1, 24% reached Level 1, 36% reached Level 2, and 26% reached Level 3. It is the feeling of the General Education Assessment Committee that Level 1 could be loosely translated as a "C" grade, Level 2 as a "B" grade, and Level 3 as an "A" grade (see expanded assessment document for a complete description of these criterion-referenced scores).

On the IFS, faculty ranked mathematical reasoning skills necessary to succeed in a chosen career 17th and mathematical reasoning skills necessary to succeed in everyday life 16th. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked mathematical reasoning skills necessary to succeed in a chosen career 16th and mathematical reasoning skills necessary to succeed in everyday life 15th. Transfer students ranked mathematical reasoning skills necessary to succeed in their chosen career life 13th, and mathematical reasoning skills necessary to succeed in everyday life 12th.

Although the data indicate that St. Ambrose is providing students mathematical reasoning skills comparable to students at other liberal arts institutions, there is relatively consistent agreement that preparing students with the mathematical skills needed in both their chosen career and in everyday life may be a weakness in the General Education Program.

### *Critical Thinking Skills*

Results of the Academic Profile indicated that students at St. Ambrose had a mean score of 113 on the Critical Thinking Skills Dimension Subscore. This is comparable to the comparison Liberal Arts Colleges ( $n=62$ ) which collectively had a mean score of  $113.5 \pm 2.8$  ( $\pm$  standard deviation). Criterion-referenced scores in reading/critical thinking on the Academic Profile indicated that 2% of the students tested did not reach Level 1, 34% reached Level 1, 50% reached Level 2, and 14% reached Level 3. It is the feeling of the General Education Assessment Committee that Level 1 could be loosely translated as a "C" grade, Level 2 as a "B" grade, and Level 3 as an "A" grade (see expanded assessment document for a complete description of these criterion-referenced scores).

On the IFS, faculty ranked the ability to think critically in a chosen career 11th and the ability to think critically in everyday life 7th. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked the ability to think critically in a chosen career 7th and the ability to think critically in everyday life 3rd. Transfer students ranked the ability to think critically in a chosen career 4th and the ability to think critically in everyday life 2nd.

Based on the available data, there appears to be some consensus that the General Education Program assists students in developing the skills necessary to become critical thinkers in both their chosen career and in everyday life.

### *Health and Recreation Skills*

All students are required to complete the course Health and Physical Education 149 (Wellness Concepts) in addition to one activity course for a total of two semester credits.

Results from institutional surveys indicated that we are doing an adequate job in developing skills that will allow students to lead a physically healthy life. On the IFS, faculty ranked this skill 6th. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked this skill 12th and transfers ranked this skill 8th. A similar conclusion can be made concerning the development of skills that will allow students to lead a mentally healthy life. On the IFS, faculty ranked this skill 10th. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked this skill 11th and transfers ranked this skill 6th.

### *Computer Literacy*

On the IFS, faculty ranked computer skills in a chosen career 18th and computer skills for everyday life 15th. Both four-year St. Ambrose students and transfer students ranked computer skills for their chosen career 18th. Four-year St. Ambrose students ranked computer skills for everyday life 14th and transfer students ranked this skill 17th.

There appears to be a general consensus that we are not adequately preparing our students

with the necessary computer skills for the future. Although it may be true that students now coming to St. Ambrose are more computer literate than in the past, it is the opinion of at least one Computer Science faculty member that incoming students, in no way, have any level of sophistication in the use of computers, and that they have very little knowledge when compared to what is taught in introductory computer science courses.

### *Library Skills*

All students are required during their first year to demonstrate Library Proficiency by completing a workbook prepared by the information services/reference librarians. Unfortunately, many students do not complete this requirement during their first year, and must complete it in their final semester on campus in order to graduate.

Students are given the opportunity to evaluate the Library Workbook at the time of completion. In general, students find the workbook useful, with rates for the top evaluation (5 - Useful or Successful) ranging from approximately 62-87%.

On the IFS, faculty ranked library skills for a chosen career 12th and library skills for everyday life 3rd. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked library skills for their chosen career 17th and library skills for everyday life 13th. Transfer students ranked library skills for their chosen career 16th and library skills for everyday life 14th.

There is an apparent mismatch between faculty and student perceptions of library skills. Although faculty seem satisfied with library skills, students are not. This may be because students often do not complete the library instruction early in their academic career and so are unaware of the resources available to them.

**UNDERSTANDING/CONTENT ("Know")** Understanding alternate ways of knowing, including what the discipline is and does, discipline methods, and discipline limits.

Content areas: Philosophy, Theology, Language, Literature, Fine Arts, Science, Social Science, History

Results of the Academic Profile indicated that students at St. Ambrose had a mean score of 118 on the Humanities Academic Area Subscore. This is comparable to the comparison Liberal Arts Colleges ( $n=62$ ) which collectively had a mean score of  $117.3 \pm 2.9$  ( $\pm$  standard deviation). St. Ambrose students had a mean score of 117 on the Social Sciences Academic Area Subscore. This is comparable to the comparison Liberal Arts Colleges ( $n=62$ ) which collectively had a mean score of  $116.3 \pm 2.8$  ( $\pm$  standard deviation). St. Ambrose students had a mean score of 118 on the Natural Sciences Academic Area Subscore. This is comparable to the comparison Liberal Arts Colleges ( $n=62$ ) which collectively had a mean score of  $118.2 \pm 2.7$  ( $\pm$  standard deviation). St. Ambrose had a mean score of 453 on the Total Score. This is comparable to the comparison Liberal Arts Colleges ( $n=62$ ) which collectively had a mean score of  $451.5 \pm 9.2$  ( $\pm$  standard deviation). Although the Academic Profile does not specifically address the discipline of Theology, there are no data to suggest that St. Ambrose students would be deficient relative to students from other comparable universities in this area. Theology requirements at St. Ambrose are similar to those seen at other Catholic institutions of higher learning, and are generally more than those seen at non-church related institutions.

Questions 25-32 of the ISS addressed whether students felt they understood the content, method, limits of the particular content area discipline. A general pattern that emerged from these data was that students tend to understand the content of each discipline better than they understand the methods or limits of the discipline.

Questions 22-39 of the IFS addressed whether faculty felt the particular content area requirements were inadequate or excessive. Language requirements were generally seen as inadequate, whereas Philosophy and Theology requirements were seen as excessive.

St. Ambrose, for the most part, appears to be doing a good job in providing content to students in the eight "content-area" disciplines; the exception to this may be in the area of Modern Languages.

## ATTITUDES/VALUES ("Think About") Values significant to enriching one's life and other's lives.

### *Respect for Differences*

Faculty (and students) were asked to respond to a description of an attitude/value (e.g., "To what extent do *general education courses* at St. Ambrose encourage a respect for differences?") on a scale from 1 - Very Little to 9 - A Great Deal. Mean scores for the *seven* attitude/value descriptions were calculated and ordered from largest to smallest. Larger mean scores tended toward the "A Great Deal" end of the continuum and smaller mean scores tended toward the "Very Little" end of the continuum. The largest mean score was assigned a rank of "1," indicating strongest agreement with the description. On the IFS, faculty ranked encouragement of a respect for differences 2nd. On the ISS, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked encouragement of a respect for differences 5th, and transfer students ranked the development of this attitude 4th.

Both students and faculty seem to agree that we are doing an adequate job in developing this attitude/value.

### *Freedom of Inquiry and Dissent*

There appears to be agreement that we are doing an adequate job in developing a sense of freedom of inquiry and dissent among our students. On the IFS, faculty ranked the development of this attitude 1st, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked this item 4th, and transfer students ranked this item 5th.

### *Justice and Equality*

We appear to be doing an adequate job in developing a sense of justice and equality among our students. On the IFS, faculty ranked the development of this attitude 4th, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked this item 3rd, and transfer students ranked this item 2nd.

### *Self-responsibility, Autonomy*

On the IFS, faculty ranked the development of self-responsibility and autonomy 6th. On the ISS, both four-year St. Ambrose students and transfer students ranked the development of self-responsibility and autonomy 1st.

There is a clear discrepancy between student and faculty beliefs concerning whether we foster the development of this attitude. There is no evidence currently available that explains this discrepancy.

### *Caring, Service, Community Responsibility*

Both faculty and students agree that we are doing a good job of developing a caring attitude among our students. Faculty ranked this item 3rd, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked this item 2nd, and transfer

students ranked this item 3rd.

There is agreement between faculty and students that we are doing less well in developing a sense of community responsibility. Faculty ranked this item 5th, four-year St. Ambrose students ranked this item 6th, and transfer students ranked this item 6th. Results of the 1995 HERI Graduating Senior Survey indicated that St. Ambrose students were less likely to report being satisfied to very satisfied with opportunities for community service and less likely to report being satisfied to very satisfied with the sense of community of campus compared to students from other private colleges and other Catholic colleges.

These feelings are likely to become more positive as the opportunities for community service continue to increase with the advent of Service Learning on campus. Development of a sense of community responsibility merits close watching over the next several years to determine if we are becoming more successful in this area.

### *Aesthetic Sense*

On the IFS, faculty ranked the development of an aesthetic sense 7th. On the ISS, both four-year St. Ambrose students and transfer students ranked the development of an aesthetic sense 7th.

There appears to be some consensus that we could be doing a better job in assisting students to develop an aesthetic sense. Students do not appear to get involved in fine arts productions over-and-above what is required in the fine arts courses in the general education distribution. This may change in the near future as, with the advent of the 1996/1997 academic year, all students are allowed to attend productions at the Galvin Fine Arts building free of charge.

**It is the intent of this [General Education] program to build student recognition of the relationship among and between General Education Goal Areas as well as the connection and application of this learning to the present and future contexts of their own lives.**

Faculty on the IFS and students on the ISS were asked to examine the extent to which this goal is being accomplished. 10.3% of the faculty and 14.5% of the students indicated that they viewed the General Education Program as "a series of independent hurdles that had to be overcome to graduate." 28.2% of the faculty and 11.4% of the students viewed the General Education Program as "a set of loosely connected set of courses that attempts to broaden students' education, but is *not* very successful." 50% of the faculty and 33.8% of the students viewed the General Education Program as "a set of loosely connected courses that attempts to broaden students education, and is *fairly* successful at doing so." 10.3% of the faculty and 34.6% of the students viewed the General Education Program as "a program that helps to build recognition of the relationship among the courses students take, and helps to build recognition of the connection and application of this learning to the present and future contexts of their life."

It appears that we can do a better job in building the connections and relationships called for in this objective. Students at St. Ambrose take very few, if any, courses that cut across disciplinary boundaries. Results of the 1995 HERI Graduating Senior Survey indicated that fewer St. Ambrose students took an interdisciplinary class, and that St. Ambrose students were less likely to report being satisfied to very satisfied with opportunities for taking interdisciplinary courses.

## **Summary**

In sum, the General Education Program at St. Ambrose University appears basically healthy. Students appear to be learning the content of the material in their general education courses, but there appears to be weaknesses in several skill areas and some attitudes/values areas. There also appears to be a general lack of cohesiveness in the General Education Program.