According to a Reliable Source...

Students Tell It Like It Is about Their St. Lawrence Education

By Macreena A. Doyle

What do our students say? If you want to know what life at St. Lawrence (or any college) is like, students are the most credible source. And according to a nationally administered survey, students think St. Lawrence is a great place to get an education.

Beginning in 1999 with a pilot program and continuing every year since, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been administered to first-year students and seniors at colleges and universities across the country. It is
designed to obtain, on an annual basis, information about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development.

The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Survey items in the NSSE represent empirically confirmed “good practices” in undergraduate education, meaning that they reflect behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college.

In 2006 the survey, the most comprehensive assessment of effective practices in higher education, includes data from 260,000 students at 525 four-year colleges and universities.

Information resulting from the surveys is useful to a variety of audiences, including prospective students and their parents, many of whom have been frustrated by mainstream “ranking” and “rating” instruments available to them, which base judgments largely on the success of admissions recruiting and fund-raising at institutions. In addition to helping college-bound high schoolers, the surveys are also very useful for colleges and universities themselves, because they can assist in identifying aspects of the undergraduate experience inside and outside the classroom that can be improved through changes in policies and practices. With increased emphasis throughout the education field on the assessment of outcomes, the NSSE has become one of the standard tools that institutions use in determining the quality of students' experiences.

To focus discussion about the importance of student engagement and assist institutions in making improvements, the NSSE created five “benchmarks” of effective educational practice:
- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student-faculty interaction
- Enriching educational experiences
- Supportive campus environment

**The St. Lawrence Findings**

The outcomes of the most recent St. Lawrence students’ surveys, released in the fall of 2006, showed some outstanding results and significant improvements in key areas from 2002, for both first-year students and seniors. A total of 441 students participated in the 2006 surveys (236 first-year students and 205 seniors). Students are selected randomly from eligible groups and among first-year students, the response rate was 46 percent; the response rate for seniors was 86 percent.

Improvement was seen in four of the five “benchmarks”:
- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student-faculty interaction
- Enriching educational experiences

St. Lawrence’s strengths, as indicated by the survey results, include:
- Strong emphasis on personal growth in oral communication; writing; requiring preparation of multiple drafts; integration of ideas from various fields of study and sources; and collaboration on projects in and outside the classroom
- Compared with all other institutions participating in the surveys, a doubled percentage (60 percent) of students undertaking a culminating senior-year experience
- Higher-than-average participation (43%) in study abroad

According to a nationally administered survey, students think St. Lawrence is a great place to get an education.

- Greater student-faculty interaction on committees and other activities outside the classroom
- Higher-than-average participation in athletics and co-curricular activities

Based on survey results of first-year students, St. Lawrence scored highest in the following categories:
- Number of papers and reports written between five and 19 pages in length
- Making class presentations
- Spending more than five hours per week participating in co-curricular activities
- Working with other students on projects during classes
- Writing at least one paper or report of 20 pages or more in length

Based on survey results of seniors, the University had its highest scores in these categories:
- Writing at least one paper or report of 20 pages or more in length
- Making class presentations
- Working with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments
- Conducting an independent study or self-designed major
- Spending more than five hours per week participating in co-curricular activities

As might be expected, the surveys also show some areas of concern for the University, where changes to current policies and practices might be warranted. They include:
- Compared with schools similar to St. Lawrence, a lower satisfaction with advising
- Lower satisfaction with institutional support, faculty-student and administrator-student relationships
• Compared with all other institutions participating in the surveys, less interaction among students of differing backgrounds, particularly race
• Fewer gains in “developing a personal code of values and ethics”, a “deepened sense of spirituality”, “critical thinking”; and “solving real-world problems”
• More hours spent by seniors “relaxing and socializing,” with concurrent lower involvement in activities such as attending campus events

Many of the findings are consistent with the University’s own research, also conducted through surveys of first-year students and seniors.

National Survey of Student Engagement

Level of Academic Challenge Benchmark Items

• Number of assigned textbooks, books or book-length packs of course readings
• Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more
• Number of written papers or reports of between five and 19 pages
• Number of written papers or reports of fewer than five pages
• Coursework emphasizes: Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory
• Coursework emphasizes: Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships
• Coursework emphasizes: Making judgments about the value of information, arguments or methods
• Coursework emphasizes: Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
• Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor’s standards or expectations

• Campus environment emphasizes spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work
• Prepared for class 21 or more hours per week

Active and Collaborative Benchmark Items

• Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
• Made a class presentation
• Worked with other students on projects during class
• Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments
• Tutored or taught other students
• Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course
• Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)

Enriching Educational Experiences Benchmark Items

• Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience or clinical assignment
• Community service or volunteer work
• Foreign language coursework
• Study abroad
• Independent study or self-designed major
• Culminating senior experience (comprehensive exam, capstone course, thesis, project, etc.)
• Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, publications, student government, sports, etc.)
• Had serious conversations with students who have different religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values
• Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity
• Campus environment encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds
• Used electronic technology (list-serve, chat group, Internet, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment

• Participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together

Student Interactions with Faculty Members Benchmark Items

• Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
• Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
• Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
• Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student-life activities, etc.)
• Received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance (written or oral)
• Worked or planned to work with a faculty member on a research project outside of course or program requirements

Supportive Campus Environment Benchmark Items

• Campus environment provides the support you need to help you succeed academically
• Campus environment helps you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
• Campus environment provides the support you need to thrive socially
• Quality of relationships with other students
• Quality of relationships with faculty members
• Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices

One of Macarena Doyle’s responsibilities at St. Lawrence is to explain information like this to the media.