

**Re-Analysis of the
College Student Survey & Survey of Incoming Freshmen*
for Purposes of Program Assessment**

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* The College Student Survey (CSS) and Survey of Incoming Freshmen (SIF) are produced by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), University of California Los Angeles. Approximately 100 institutions nationwide, and over 20,000 students, participate in these surveys.

Background

Assessment of outcomes produced by the college experience in its entirety is an important component of the larger effort of program assessment. Comprehensive survey data from graduating seniors can provide a useful supplement to information gathered piecemeal, or on a course by course basis, or at various interim points.

Three possible benchmarks can be imagined when assessing outcomes achieved by seniors.

- *Absolute benchmark.* Here one would compare results to a criterion figure believed to mark off strong from weak performance; for example, one could ask whether 80% or more of SCU seniors were satisfied with their college experience.
- *Comparative benchmark.* Here one would compare findings for SCU, whatever their absolute level, with results for other institutions.
- *Value-added benchmark.* Here one would compare the answers of graduating seniors to the answers these same individuals gave when they entered as freshmen.

The great advantage of the CSS and SIF surveys from HERI is that they enable all three benchmarks to be applied using large samples.

Available Data

Santa Clara has participated in the CSS since at least 1984. This report focuses on the 1995, 1996, and 1997 CSS surveys, which have been linked to the corresponding freshman surveys from 4 years earlier. The CSS surveys were completed by SCU students late in their senior year, while the freshman surveys were completed at the beginning or just prior to the start of the freshman year. Approximately 1500 CSS surveys accumulated over the three year period (response rates were somewhat under 50% in 1996 and 1997, much higher in 1995). Of these 1500+ surveys, a little over 700 could be matched to the individual respondent's corresponding freshman survey.

HERI collected CSS data from over 20,000 college students in each of these years, and group means or distributions are available for several categories of schools. Santa Clara is categorized as a private university. About 14 other institutions fall into this category (not all participated in all three years). Interestingly, the majority of the data in the private university category appear to come from other Catholic or Jesuit universities (e.g., Georgetown, Fordham, Creighton, Notre Dame). The non-sectarian universities in this category also seem reasonably comparable to Santa Clara (e.g., Emory, Vanderbilt, University of Southern California, DePaul). Hence, this category will be referred to as 'peer universities' throughout this report.

HERI also publishes average data for all of the 100+ institutions participating. Unfortunately, the bulk of these schools are denominational colleges (both Catholic and Protestant), and most of the remainder are small liberal arts colleges (e.g., Bowdoin, Middlebury, Harvey Mudd, King's College). This is unfortunate because most of what is distinctive to Santa Clara stems either from its religious affiliation, or its commitment to personal attention to students—factors that also characterize most of the other schools in the sample. Hence, the overall sample does not

provide the opportunities for contrast that, say, a sample composed predominantly of large state universities would have. *No sizable differences should be expected when SCU is compared to either the peer group or the total sample.*

Content of the HERI Surveys

Each HERI survey contains almost 200 items, and no attempt was made to analyze them all. Rather, the focus was on those items most closely associated with the distinctive mission of the university, in particular, items that might tap domains such as compassion, leadership for a just society, and respect and appreciation for diversity. To identify candidate items I scrutinized recent examples of both the senior and freshman surveys. Greatest emphasis was placed on items that recurred in at least 2 of the three CSS surveys.

Other taskforces might choose to apply this methodology to other items in the surveys. Among the many categories of items ignored in this report are: 1) satisfaction with specific facilities or services (e.g., student housing, academic advising); 2) intellectual abilities (e.g., critical thinking, writing ability); 3) social behaviors (e.g., ability to work cooperatively); 4) student-professor interaction; 5) career plans; and 6) political views.

To provide additional information, two variables were used for internal comparisons: school (business or engineering or A&S), and ethnic/racial background (specifically, whether or not the student checked white/caucasian).¹ Other possible contrasts were ignored (e.g., sex, gpa, religious background, political views, parents' income, residence on campus, etc.). The rationale for this selection is that schools are important because at SCU, programs are delivered by schools, and program assessment is the purpose of this analysis. Racial background is important because of some of the specific questions analyzed. None of the other breakout variables struck me as all that interesting or likely to produce significant differences; but that is only my judgment.

Design of Analysis

For each of the item domains, the absolute benchmark is applied first—what percent of SCU students give the focal response, and does this appear to be 'high' or 'low'? This percentage figure is derived from all 1500 senior surveys. It is the unweighted average of the percentages for the three individual years. Where appropriate, this initial analysis will look at breakdowns by school and/or race.

In the case of five items it was also possible to apply the value-added benchmark—has the Santa Clara experience changed these students? This analysis uses only the 700 linked surveys. A repeated measures ANOVA is applied to determine whether changes are significant. Finally, I apply the comparative benchmark—how does Santa Clara stack up against other schools in the sample? This analysis again uses all 1500 surveys (except when freshman to senior changes are

¹ Specifically, aggregated major was used to determine school (HERI variable name: CSSMAJA). The racial background question allows students to check multiple descriptors. For simplicity, the critical variable was simply whether the respondent checked 'white' or not.

being compared across schools). The comparison school figures use the unweighted average of the three years.

Text of Items & Answer Categories

Overall Satisfaction

A.1 "If you could make your college choice over, would you still choose to enroll at your current college?" (*definitely yes/definitely not*)

Compassion

B.1 "Indicate the importance to you personally of helping others who are in difficulty" (*essential/very/somewhat/not important*)

B.2 "Indicate the importance to you personally of participating in a community action program" (*essential/very/somewhat/not important*)

B.3 "Please indicate how often you performed volunteer work during the past year" (*frequently/occasionally/not at all*)

Leadership for a just society

"Compared with when you entered college as a freshman, how would you now describe your:

- C.1 Leadership ability
- C.2 Understanding of the problems facing your community
- C.3 Understanding of the problems facing our nation" (*much stronger/much weaker*)

C.4 [reverse coded] "Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society" (*agree strongly/disagree strongly*)

Respect for Diversity

D.1 "Indicate the importance to you personally of helping to promote racial understanding" (*essential/very/somewhat/not important*)

D.2 "Please indicate how often you socialized with someone of another racial/ethnic group during the past year" (*frequently/occasionally/not at all*)

"Compared with when you entered college as a freshman, how would you now describe your:

- D.3 Knowledge of people from different races/cultures
- D.4 Ability to get along with people of different races/cultures" (*much stronger/much weaker*)

Summary—Strengths & Limitations of the HERI Data

The most important strengths of this data are the large sample size and the opportunity for comparisons. Of all the data sources listed in the 2/26/98 compilation by Institutional Research, perhaps only the faculty evaluation data sets, the Crane data, the Admitted Student Questionnaire, and the EBI Business Student Satisfaction survey can compare in terms of sample size, opportunity to benchmark, or both. Of these, only the Crane data (previously analyzed) has much in the way of items related to central aspects of the university mission.

The most significant weakness of the HERI data is that it was not designed for program assessment, nor was it designed to be maximally informative with respect to SCU concerns, so that only a few items really address issues central to the WASC self-study effort. A second weakness is that the population of institutions in the HERI database is far from ideal from the standpoint of examining whether Santa Clara delivers on its distinctive mission.

Results

Q1: How satisfied are graduating seniors at Santa Clara?

Graduating seniors are very satisfied with their overall experience at Santa Clara—82.1% indicate that if they had it all to do over again, they would reenroll at SCU. This compares to 81.2% of students at peer institutions, and 79.2% of students at all 4-year institutions. Satisfaction appears to have increased in recent years, moving from 80.5% in 1995 to 83.1% in 1997.

There are few differences across schools or across white and non-white students. A&S students tend to be slightly less satisfied (81.3%, vs. 83.9% for business and 82.9% for engineering). The numbers for individual schools are sufficiently variable from year to year that not much weight can be placed on these differences. Similarly, non-white and white students are about equally satisfied (81.1% vs. 82.6%), with the difference being due entirely to a shortfall in 1996.

These high levels of satisfaction are confirmed by the Crane data, by course-by-course evaluations, and by the EBI benchmarking of business student satisfaction.

Q2: How effective is Santa Clara at instilling beliefs and in motivating activities associated with compassion?

Three items could be related to compassion: the importance placed on helping others and participating in community action programs, and the frequency with which the student engaged in volunteer work over the past year.

At the level of values, 70.8% of SCU seniors indicate that it is very important, or essential, to help others who are in difficulty, and 35.7% feel it is very important or essential to participate in community action programs. Both numbers increase steadily over the three year period, from 68.2% to 73.7%, and from 31.5% to 39.1%. In terms of behaviors, 25.4% report they frequently

engaged in volunteer work over the past year; this number rises to 79.8% when 'occasionally' and 'frequently' are lumped together. These numbers also increase steadily over the period.

All three items also appear on the Survey of Incoming Freshmen, allowing an investigation of whether the SCU experience actually served to increase compassion. Here the results are, on the face of it, much less positive. A repeated measures analysis of variance, with year of the CSS survey as a between-subjects blocking variable (this adjusts for the different number of respondents across years) was applied to the mean response to these questions. The results show **no change** in the value placed on helping others and participating in community action programs. The results also show a significant **decrease** in the frequency of volunteer work reported by seniors, as opposed to what these same students reported for the period preceding entry into college. Of course, this latter finding may have nothing to do with compassion; it may only reflect time pressures associated with the senior year. Nonetheless, the three items taken together provide no evidence that Santa Clara is changing students for the better in the area of compassion.

Comparative data from other schools provide additional perspective. The table below shows percentage values for the responses 'essential/very important' or 'occasionally/frequently'.

Item	SCU	Private Universities	All 4-year institutions
Importance of helping others in difficulty	70.8%	71.9%	73.5%
" " participating in community action programs	35.7%	33.1%	31.6%
Performed volunteer work in past year	79.8%	72.7%	71.9%

SCU students score a little better on community action and a little worse on helping others, amounting to a wash when these two values are taken together. SCU students do score markedly higher on the frequency of volunteer activities. Further perspective is provided by looking at the freshman vs. senior results for other schools. It turns out that the frequency of volunteering declines across the board. College seniors simply don't do as much volunteer work as high school seniors. The decline at SCU is of the same magnitude as that seen at other schools. Similarly, on average scores for the two value statements don't change over the course of college—this too is a general finding and not one peculiar to SCU.

An earlier analysis of the Crane data used a cross-sectional comparison of current students to show that freshmen did not differ from seniors on measures of compassion. That analysis was vulnerable to the possibility that poor sampling of the various classes led to that result. The HERI data is useful for ruling out that threat, since it concerns the same students surveyed as freshmen and seniors.

We might summarize the results of this section by saying that American college students in general are a fairly compassionate group, and that SCU students by and large are neither more nor less compassionate than other college students, with the exception that they are rather more likely to engage in volunteer work. It is also the case that the experience of college appears to

have little impact on values associated with compassion. Students leave college pretty much as they come in.

Thus, although the Santa Clara mission is distinctive with respect to the emphasis placed on compassion, Santa Clara students are not themselves distinguished by their degree of compassion relative to other college students—at least, not yet. Note that the upward trend observed in the Santa Clara figures is not paralleled in the national figures. Since it is only in the last few years that the strategic planning process has kicked into high gear, it may be premature to dismiss the distinctiveness of Santa Clara students with respect to compassion. Were the upward trend to continue in the 1998 and 1999 surveys, while the national average stayed constant, we might, two years from now, come to conclude that the strategic planning push that began in 1995-96 was beginning to pay real dividends.

In the meantime, we should not fool ourselves that education for compassion is an easy matter, or that the compassion evident among SCU students is anything unusual for a college campus.

Leadership for a Just Society

Q3: To what extent are SCU graduates ready to take a leadership role in bringing about a more just society?

The HERI surveys contain an item that measures what might be called despair or impotence: "Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes to our society." This sentiment is the antithesis of the stance that Santa Clara tries to encourage. On average, 75% of SCU seniors disagree with this sentiment. Unfortunately, there is a significant decrease in rejection of this view between freshman and senior years—SCU students are more despairing as seniors than they were as freshmen.

The comparative data again provide needed perspective. The level of rejection of impotence at Santa Clara compares favorably to the levels found at other private universities (72.6%) and other 4 year institutions generally (72.7%). Moreover, the drop off from freshman to senior year at Santa Clara is less than at other schools (2 vs. 5 percentage points).

We may conclude that Santa Clara is modestly more successful than most schools at preventing the spread of cynicism; but that even a Santa Clara education is insufficient to totally prevent a slow disillusionment during the college years.

Given an absence of despair, do seniors feel that their leadership abilities have improved as a result of their college education? Yes; 24.1% of SCU seniors feel that their leadership abilities are much stronger, compared to 19.7% of seniors at private universities and 22.5% at all 4 year institutions. Students in the business school feel particularly good about their improvement in leadership, while students in engineering feel notably less sanguine—27.2% for business vs. 15.3% for engineering (A&S comes in at about the university average).

Given an absence of despair and confidence in their leadership abilities, do SCU students feel they have gained a stronger understanding of the problems facing their community and nation?

The answer, as shown below, is “as much or perhaps a little more than the average college student.”

Item (% much stronger)	SCU	Private Universities	All 4-year institutions
Understanding of community problems	18.7%	17.3%	18.5%
Understanding of nations problems	23.9%	21.8%	23.1%

On balance, then, Santa Clara seems to be somewhat more effective than other schools in averting despair and building students’ confidence in their leadership abilities, and at par in providing the understanding needed to act.

Respect for Diversity

Q4: How effective is Santa Clara at nurturing respect for diverse races and cultures?

Several items on the survey assess the importance placed on promoting racial understanding, knowledge and acceptance of different races/cultures, and socializing behaviors. In absolute terms, 46.3% of SCU seniors feel it is very important or essential to help promote racial understanding. This compares to 41.6% at peer institutions, and 42.3% at all 4 year institutions. Unfortunately, this is a value that drops over the college years. It drops by about 4 percentage points at SCU and at private universities, and a little more than 2 points at all institutions. Hence, SCU can not claim any value added here. Rather, Santa Clara attracts a group of students who place higher value on this goal than do most of their fellows at other schools, and the Santa Clara experience erodes this value to about the same degree as the college experience at other schools.

About 22% of SCU seniors feel that they have a much stronger knowledge of, and acceptance of, different races and cultures as a result of college. This is noticeably higher than in the case of private universities and 4 year institutions generally, which come in about 19%.

Finally, 65.5% of SCU seniors indicate that they had socialized with someone from another racial/ethnic group within the past year. This is markedly higher than is the case at other private universities (52.5%) or 4 year institutions generally (46.7%). The interpretation of this result is complicated somewhat by the accidental fact that Santa Clara, located in California, is, at 68.1%, quite a bit less white than peer institutions (80.9%) or 4 year institutions (83.9%). Minority group members have little choice but to socialize with members of other groups; and, an analysis of white and non-white SCU students shows that non-white students do indeed report higher levels of socialization with other racial/ethnic groups. Nonetheless, even among white SCU students only, scores on this item are measurably higher than at peer universities or 4 year institutions.

Respect for human persons is a hallmark of the Jesuit tradition. Achieving this respect, in America today, is perhaps most challenging when ‘the Other’ is a person is of a different race or ethnicity. The data show that Santa Clara is effective at attracting students who respect diversity,

in helping them grow in terms of knowledge and acceptance of diverse groups and cultures, and in fostering behaviors, such as socializing, that give concrete meaning to that respectful attitude.

Conclusion

These analyses provide strong evidence that Santa Clara is not a failure, whether at the mundane level of providing a satisfactory college experience, or the more lofty level of instilling values and behavior consistent with its Jesuit mission.

I use the double negative to highlight the asymmetric character of the conclusions that can be supported from the HERI data. These data really do rule out failure. Across a variety of different questions centrally relevant to its mission, Santa Clara scores at or above the average for peer universities and for small liberal arts colleges. These data make it very difficult to judge Santa Clara a laggard or a weakling. In those cases where the value-added analysis shows a negative effect of the Santa Clara experience, this negative effect is found at other schools as well, suggesting that it may not indicate a true 'value-subtracting' effect of college, but rather, a loss of the naivete of childhood, as 17 & 18 year old children mature into 22-23 year old adults. In other words, the declines may reflect an artifact of the different survey response styles of children as compared to adults.

On the other hand, it is not possible to use the HERI data to claim a resounding success. Most Santa Clara scores come in at about the average. It is difficult to refute the conclusion that Santa Clara is entirely ordinary—a good school, comparable to any other respectable private school, but in no way distinctive. Since it was never Santa Clara's goal to be ordinary, we cannot account this a success.

There are glimmers of hope, however. The HERI data provide the toughest possible comparison group for Santa Clara, consisting of very similar institutions for the most part. If we simply count the number of times the Santa Clara score came in above the comparison group's score, by however small an amount, this occurred in 11 of 12 comparisons. Moreover, the current intensive strategic planning effort was scarcely in gear at the beginning of the three year period under study. And, the trend in the Santa Clara case is positive in many instances, even as the nationwide results are flat to down.

In summary, it is too early to tell whether the strategic planning effort, intended to put all the wood of university effort behind the arrowhead of its mission, will succeed; but the data thus far are certainly encouraging.