

OCCASIONAL CAMPUS COMMUNIQUE

November 19, 2012

The President's Perspective – A Brief Essay

During the 2011-2012 academic year I may have asked our faculty and staff for the impossible, or at least for something that wasn't very likely.

Last year we had a record enrollment of new first-year and transfer students. And with this highest-enrollment-ever-in-the-history-of-North-Park I asked all of us to “walk alongside our students”—to give extra attention to our students' well-being.

It would be easy to conceive how we might give extra attention to fewer students. But giving extra attention to more students? How could this be possible, or at least how could we reasonably expect to accomplish it very well?

Yet, though it may have been unreasonable, perhaps even impossible, I asked us to “walk alongside our students” better than we had ever done before.

So how did we do? Well, the evidence came in this past week.

For several years we've asked first-year and senior undergraduates to complete an assessment survey during the spring semester. This national instrument, called the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), is designed to measure how extensively college students engage important aspects of the student experience. The research in higher education has demonstrated that certain student behaviors and institutional features are powerful contributors to learning and personal development. The more students participate the more they learn; the less students participate, the less they learn.

To be sure, NSSE doesn't use my words—to “walk alongside our students.” Yet, this is one aspect of the student experience that NSSE measures. In this survey, a number of important student behaviors and institutional features are clustered in five benchmarks, and one of these is described as “Supportive Campus Environment.” Here are the specific elements that contribute to such a campus environment, according to the NSSE research:

- The campus environment provides the support students need to succeed academically
- The campus environment helps students cope with their non-academic responsibilities
- The campus environment provides the support students need to thrive socially
- The quality of a student's relationships with other students
- ...and with faculty members

- ...and with administrative personnel and offices.

Taken together, these six items identify what it means to “walk alongside students.”

This past week we received the results of the spring 2012 survey. And guess what! Both first-year and senior students this past year (when we had a record enrollment) rated how we “walk alongside our students” more highly than these two groups rated us three years earlier. In this survey, students at North Park told us very clearly that last year they experienced an increase in personal attention from faculty and staff. (For more details on this I’ll return to the NSSE survey later in this Communique.)

We achieved what we might have thought was impossible—we walked alongside students more effectively this past year than we had done in earlier years.

This makes me proud. It also makes me deeply grateful for the dedication of faculty and staff at North Park. Each day we’re involved in the particular tasks assigned to us...we teach, we counsel, we coach, we clean, we keep the IT network up, we do the specific tasks assigned to each of us. But much more than this, we care for students; we walk alongside; we create a “supportive campus environment.” We work, with significance and in service.

Board of Trustees

As is our custom, during the last week of October the Board of Trustees gathered for its regular fall meeting. This year the Board meeting coincided with the groundbreaking ceremony and celebration for The Johnson Center. And for this reason the meeting schedule for the Board followed a unique path.

What was usual is that in the October meeting we welcomed new members to the Board of Trustees. Seven individuals joined the Board:

- Thomas Bagley, Chicago, founder and senior managing director, Pflingsten Partners, LLC
- Grant Clay, Clay Center, Kan., lead pastor, Clay Center Covenant Church
- Gail Dahlstrom, Etna, N.H., vice president for facilities management, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, Lebanon, N.H.
- Dawn Helwig, Chicago, actuary, Milliman, Inc.
- Stephen Johnson, Warrenville, Ill., executive vice president, field operations, Imagine Solutions, Dallas
- Michael L. Jordan, Kerman, Calif., pastor, La Viña Covenant Church
- Albert Tizon, Upper Darby, Pa., associate professor of evangelical and holistic ministry, Palmer Theological Seminary, King of Prussia, Pa.

As we do each year at the fall meeting the Board of Trustees also reviewed enrollment numbers for all of our programs. And because our enrollments are lower than we

expected them to be we engaged the Board in a more intentional and deliberate review of our recruitment effort. Together we considered the reasons for the decline in enrollment and we reviewed strategies which are being put in place in our current enrollment cycle to respond to this trend.

Most importantly, on Friday afternoon and evening members of the Board of Trustees joined faculty, staff, and students, along with several hundred friends of North Park from off-campus, in the groundbreaking festivities for The Johnson Center. We had a great time, and trustees will long-remember this event as will all of us who were privileged to attend.

Institutional Planning

Several weeks ago I distributed to all members of the faculty and staff two documents which are drafts developed to-date on preparing a new university-wide plan. The first step in a campus discussion of these documents has already been completed. Over the past few weeks I have met with both the Dean's Council and the Faculty Senate for an initial discussion of the drafted documents.

The next step is to engage the discussion more broadly within schools, departments, and work units. These more extensive discussions are being scheduled from January 1 through March 15, and are being coordinated by the deans and directors responsible for the respective units. As your discussion group is called together I hope you'll join your colleagues, and me, for this important opportunity to reflect on and carefully plan North Park's future.

Mark Your Calendars

During the coming weeks there are several important events we'll all want to participate in.

- Sunday, December 2 – 4:00 p.m. – Festival of Lessons and Carols at Our Lady of Mercy Church in the Albany Park neighborhood.
- Thursday and Friday, December 6 & 7 – 7:00-9:30 p.m. – Christmas Celebration at Hawkinson House for all faculty, staff, spouses, and guests
- Tuesday, December 11 – 11:30 a.m. – Annual Faculty and Staff Christmas Luncheon, with employee service recognition, in Hamming Hall
- Friday, December 14 – 7:30 p.m. – Winter Commencement in the Gymnasium

Additionally, as has been our practice, as the spring semester begins we'll come together for Gathering Day 2.0. This will be held on Friday, January 25, beginning at 10:30, with lunch following.

Foster and Kedzie

Perhaps you've noticed the fence constructed this past week on our property at the corner of Foster and Kedzie Avenues, along with several smaller fenced areas in the campus "front yard" running west along Foster Avenue. These fenced areas identify the beginning work on an exciting two-part campus improvement project. The first part consists of work directly on our property. We're improving this edge of the campus with new landscaping and entrances, including low fencing between Anderson Chapel and Kedzie Avenue as well as just a bit south on Kedzie. The "cornerstone" to this project is a major new sign at the corner intersection to mark North Park's presence in the neighborhood. An architectural rendering of the new intersection signage is posted on a banner attached to the construction fence.

The second part of the project belongs to the city but will serve us very well. A new streetscape is planned for Kedzie Avenue extending from Kimball Avenue to the water channel on the east edge of Holmgren Athletic Complex. This involves new curbs, sidewalks, light poles, and trees, as well as planters and other amenities. The project is scheduled to begin in the spring and likely will extend into the summer.

Once fully completed (and we are hopeful this will be by the beginning of the fall semester 2013) these two complementary projects will greatly enhance our campus front along Foster Avenue.

NSSE

How does the North Park student experience compare with other colleges and universities? One answer to this important question comes through the extensive benchmark data available through the NSSE instrument, as I introduced above.

To identify the multi-dimensional nature of student engagement, NSSE has developed five indicators of effective educational practice. Each indicator involves a number of individual factors or questions which form the content to these five clusters.

The comparative response of North Park students is summarized in the table below. In the two columns representing the comparison groups a "+" symbol indicates that North Park's score is higher than the comparison group and a "-" symbol indicates a score which is lower. Both symbols represent differences which statistically are identified as significantly different. When no symbol is entered it indicates there is no meaningful difference between North Park's score and the average score for the respective comparison group.

Two comparison groups are identified. The Carnegie Class represents all schools nationwide which are similar to North Park—we are comprehensive universities which offer both undergraduate and master’s programs. The NSSE 2012 group represents the aggregate scores for all students who completed the survey, regardless of the type of school they attend.

		<u>Comparison Groups</u>	
	Student Class	Carnegie Class	NSSE 2012
<u>Level of Academic Challenge</u>			
<i>How challenging is your institution’s intellectual and creative work?</i>	First-Year Senior		
<u>Active & Collaborative Learning</u>			
<i>Are your students actively involved in their learning, individually and working with others?</i>	First-Year Senior	+	+
<u>Student-Faculty Interaction</u>			
<i>Do your students work with faculty members inside and outside the classroom?</i>	First-Year Senior	+	+
<u>Enriching Educational Experiences</u>			
<i>Do your students take advantage of complementary learning opportunities?</i>	First-Year Senior	+	+
<u>Supportive Campus Environment</u>			
<i>Do your students feel the institution is committed to their success?</i>	First-Year Senior	+	+

What does this tell us? First, it’s important to note that in no category, for either first-year or senior students, do we score below the Carnegie group or aggregate-NSSE average. Second, in many categories, in fact in a majority of categories, we score above the benchmark average, indicated by a “+” symbol in the respective column.

There are many other things to learn about the undergraduate experience at North Park based on the NSSE results. Some are deeply encouraging, others point to areas for improvement. Here’s just a sampling:

- 77% of first-year (FY) students feel North Park places substantial emphasis on academics and 57% work harder than they thought they could to meet faculty expectations.

- Yet, only 33% of FY students spend more than 15 hours per week preparing for class and 13% spend five hours or less.
- 66% of FY students frequently discuss readings or ideas from courses outside of class.
- By their senior year, 74% of North Park undergraduates participate in some form of practicum, internship, field experience, or clinical assignment.
- 86% of FY students say their faculty are available, helpful, and sympathetic.
- 94% of seniors have discussed career plans with faculty.
- 63% of FY students frequently have serious conversations with students who are different from themselves in terms of their religious, political, or personal beliefs.
- 59% of FY students frequently have serious conversations with those of a different race or ethnicity.
- By the senior year, 74% of students participate in community service or volunteer work.
- 88% of FY students rate their experience as good or excellent; 76% of seniors would choose North Park again if they could start their college career over.
- 84% of FY students feel North Park provides substantial support for their academic success; and 66% of FY students perceive substantial support for their social needs.

Again, this list is merely a sampling of the items identified in the NSSE survey. But taken together, it means that overall, students at North Park are often involved in the types of good practices that promote learning, and as an institution we provide the kind of environment which also promotes student learning. Can we do it better? Certainly. But are we doing it well? According to the NSSE results the learning environment provided at North Park, and the frequency with which students participate in best-practice activities, is strong.

This is great news for our students—both those who study with us today and those who will enroll here next year and in succeeding years.

It's important to note that student success in each of these areas depends on our work with them. Or to put it in my words: student success at North Park depends on our walk alongside them. Our students succeed through our diligent efforts.

Thanks for keeping up the great work!