

Trends

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A Report Card on our Liberal Arts Mission: Student Views

In spring 2008 we conducted a web-administered survey of CSB/SJU students to capture their views of themselves as liberally educated people. Complete responses were received from 873 CSB/SJU students (about 22% of the student body). The respondents represented students from all four years, all four divisions (Humanities, Fine Arts, Social Science & Natural Science), and both genders (though not proportionally).

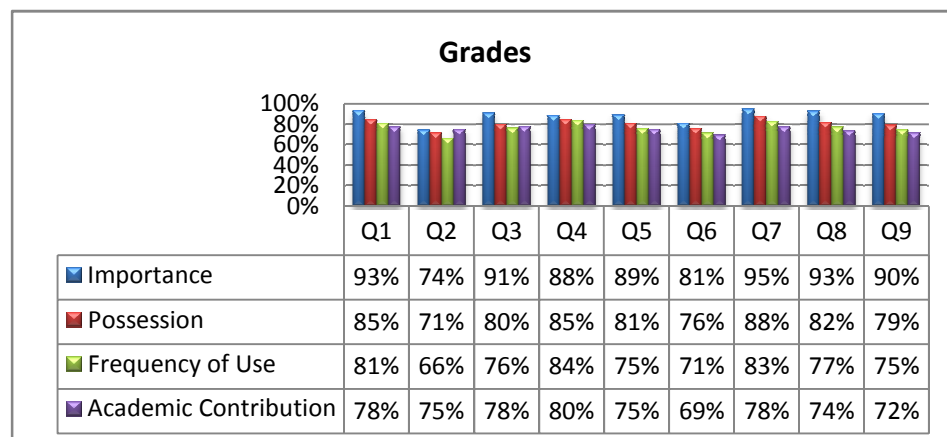
The Qualities of the Liberally Educated Person

Since CSB/SJU do not have an *official* definition of liberal arts for the purposes of our academic enterprise, we turned to the literature for relevant description. We also wanted simple concrete language uncluttered by jargon. We adapted an essay by William Cronon (1999) on the [10] *Qualities of the Liberally Educated Person* into the nine qualities below.

Quality 1: Listen carefully to hear others' view and perspectives	Quality 6: Apply intellectual rigor in socially responsible ways
Quality 2: Understand and appreciate a wide range of literary and other expressive works	Quality 7: Act with respect and open mindedness
Quality 3: Converse comfortably with anyone	Quality 8: Get things done in the world
Quality 4: Write clearly and persuasively	Quality 9: Integrate knowledge, skills, and values to make the world a better place
Quality 5: Solve a wide variety of problems	

The list may not include everything we think is important, but it is hard to argue that any of these qualities should be removed from the list. Descriptive statements of behaviors/abilities clarified the meaning of each quality in the survey. For example, Quality 2 includes a parallel series of abilities: *I intelligently discuss ideas and contexts portrayed in* [Fine Arts, Humanities, Natural Science, and Social Science].

Students were asked to rate the importance of each quality, the extent to which they thought they possessed each quality, the frequency with which they used each quality and the extent to which academic experiences at CSB/SJU contributed to development of the quality. We purposefully limited the survey to academic (course-related) activities. We recognize that these qualities also are developed in other college activities, including co-curricular experiences, student employment, and athletics. We limited the number for survey management and focus reasons.



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Quality Importance

The majority of students think that all nine qualities are important! As indicated in the graph above (blue bars), Qualities 7 (respect and open-mindedness), 1 (writing), and 8 (getting things done in the world) were rated the highest, while Qualities 2 (understand and appreciate a range of expressive works) and 6 (apply intellectual rigor in socially responsible ways) scored the lowest. The Quality Importance “grade” from these respondents ranged from a low of 74% to a high of 95%. Qualities 7 and 1 reflect our Benedictine values (though additional questions arise from this finding, including whether students are attracted to CSB/SJU for these values or whether they develop an appreciation for them while they are here).

Quality Possession

Students then rated the extent to which they believed they possessed each quality (these beliefs may or may not represent *reality* but they do represent student perceptions). Again, Qualities 7 and 1 received high marks and Qualities 2 and 6 lower marks. The Quality Possession “grade” ranged from a low of 71% to a high of 85%. Keep in mind that these data reflect responses of all students, first-year to seniors. Do students work harder to **acquire** qualities they think are important or do they think the qualities they **already possess** are the important ones...which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

Frequency of Using the Qualities

Though correlated with quality possession, the *frequency of using* a quality (green bars) was relatively lower. It is unclear whether students are *choosing* not to use these qualities or are *not expected* to use them in course learning activities. Our students see themselves using Qualities 4 and 7 most often and Qualities 2 and 6 least often. The frequency of use “grade” ranges from a low of 66% to a high of 84%. The strength of Quality 4 as a high-use quality likely represents our writing emphasis in FYS and writing “flags.” Whether this finding will persist in the Common Curriculum remains to be seen.

CSB/SJU Academic Experiences Contribution to Quality Development

We were interested in the extent to which students thought the academic experiences contributed (purple bars) to their development of each of the nine qualities. Quality 4 rates the highest ‘marks’ for academic contribution to quality development. Qualities 6 and 9 were rated the lowest. The CSB/SJU Academic contribution “grade” ranged from a low of 69% to a high of 80%.

So what?

So, do we pass? As usual, it all depends. What is ‘passing’? What do we, as faculty, want ‘passing’ to be? Quality 2 (which we viewed as the Liberal Arts distribution) was rated lowest in *importance*, *possession* and *frequency of use* by our students. Are we concerned that this quality is the lowest? Overall ...is this good enough...or can we or should we do better? If we can improve, how can we work together to accomplish a better Report Card in the future?

Additional findings related to gender, academic division, and lower division/upper division status are forthcoming. If you are anxious for more information now, we have posted some preliminary reports at https://www.csbsju.edu/nursing/studentperceptions/Student_Perceptions.htm

More to come...

References:

Cronon, W. (1999). ‘Only connect’ the goals of a liberal education. *Liberal Education*, 85(1), 6.

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