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**General College
University of Minnesota**

**TRIO Survival Seminar Student Opinion Survey
Fall Quarter, 1985**

**Evaluation Summary by
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The Survival Seminar has been a required component of the TRIO Academic Year program for a number of years. Its purpose is to assist students in adjusting to college life by encouraging the development of skills and use of resources necessary for success in the college setting. The seminar's effectiveness in achieving its goals has been discussed by program staff, but not studied from the student's perspective. When questions again arose in fall quarter 1985 about the appropriateness of requiring Seminar enrollment and its effectiveness in aiding student adjustment to the college environment, an evaluation of the Seminar was suggested. The results of this survey should assist TRIO program staff in deciding whether to continue offering the Survival Seminar as a required component of the TRIO Academic Year program and determining the content and emphasis the Seminar could take in the future.

Method

In the last week of fall quarter, during the regular class time, students were asked to complete the University's Student Opinion Survey (Form OS), a 16-item Likert scale commonly distributed to gather student evaluations of courses and instructors at the end of a term. Appended to this survey were 20 additional questions to determine student achievement of the course-content objectives. These items concerned development of skills and use of resources, such as overcoming test anxiety and how to use campus libraries. The final six items concerned student behavior in such matters as class attendance, completion of homework, and asking for needed help. Students were also encouraged to write general comments about the course at the end of the survey form. A copy of the survey form is available from the General College Evaluation Office.

The survey took about fifteen minutes for students to complete. Evaluation staff administered the survey at either the beginning or the end of the Seminar on the last day of class and collected the results, informing students that the instructor would not see the results until after course grades had been turned in. (When a snowstorm closed the University on the last day of scheduled class for one of the sections, the instructor asked students who came in to see her during that week to complete the survey and place it in the evaluator's mailbox.)

The combined results for the four TRIO sections of the Survival Seminar are given in the Appendix. Results for individual instructors were distributed to them. Because such information is private data on each instructor, it is not maintained or distributed by the Evaluation Office. Each seminar section had between 12 and 16 respondents. The percentage of students listing each item option is given, based on the total sample size of 57 students. Because the course is a small class with a discussion format and "soft" content areas, it is expected that student opinions of the course will be positively skewed rather than normally distributed over the response options.

Results of item 16 of the Student Opinion Survey are not given. This item asks students what grades they had received in recent college courses. Because TRIO students are first-quarter freshmen (except for a few who were in Summer Institute), and thus have not received college grades, item 16 does not apply to them.

Results

The Instructors

The strength of the Survival Seminar appears to be its instructors. Seventy percent or more of the students indicated that Survival Seminar instructors were very good to excellent in clarity of presentation and discussion of course material, rapport with their students, providing helpful feedback about student performance in the class, and overall instructor teaching skill. Seventy-six percent of the students said the instructors were usually or always available between classes to help them. Over half of the students indicated that the instructors were successful in getting them interested and involved in the course and in getting them to think, and paid attention to how the students learned best.

The Students

The TRIO students were first-quarter freshmen enrolled in the two-credit Survival Seminar, which met once each week for two hours. Readings and written assignments were regularly required. Only 19 percent of the students attended all ten class sessions, and 28 percent missed three or more sessions. The students were more responsible about doing homework than about attending class, with 84 percent indicating that they usually or always completed their assignments on time.

About half the students said they were highly motivated to do well in the course. Thirty-six percent felt that they already had a very good grasp of the course content areas before enrolling. This may be reflected in the finding that only 48 percent thought they had learned very much in the seminar.

A number of the students seemed to have difficulties using GC resources for the academic help they needed. While 19 percent indicated they didn't need academic support from the instructor outside of class, only 16 percent said they always asked for the help they needed. Twenty-one percent of the students said they did not meet with the instructor even though they needed help with the research paper. Thirty-five percent never used the Reading/Writing Skills Center for needed help.

The Course Content

The Seminar itself received lower marks than the instructors in the students' opinion. Only 54 percent of the students rated the course as very good to excellent. Half of the students considered the texts and handouts very interesting, two-thirds of the students found them of high quality. About two-thirds of the students seemed to think the grading was fair, as indicated by their opinion that evaluation procedures measured their knowledge and understanding of the course content and covered the important points.

Course content objectives are listed in items 17 through 36. For a course objective to be considered "achieved," 60 percent of the students should have indicated (by circling the fourth or fifth response on the six-point scale) that they did not know how to use the particular skill or resource before they entered the course, that they had learned in the course how to use that skill or resource, and that they are now successfully applying (or attempting to apply) that knowledge. Other options the student could select include: previous knowledge of the skill or resource; no previous knowledge but did not learn it in the course; no previous knowledge, learned but have not applied; or was not present when it was covered, or it was not covered in the course. If students already have the skill (previous knowledge), inclusion of that topic in the Seminar is repetitious and boring for some students and takes needed time from other skill areas. If students did not learn how to use the skill or resource covered in the course, problems with the presentation of the information or exercises

to encourage application may be indicated. Acquisition of knowledge without application may indicate a problem with transfer of skills, since most topics are immediately applicable in student courses and college life.

According to the 60 percent criterion, 3 of the 20 course objectives were met: identifying learning style, communication of student ideas through written papers, and overcoming test anxiety. An additional six objectives were nearly met (more than 50 percent of the students had no previous knowledge but were now using the skill or resource): time management, stress management, how to study for tests, how to take tests, how to plan class schedules, and use of campus libraries. Areas where 30 percent or more of the students indicated they had previous knowledge of the skill area or resource were assertiveness, notetaking, and communicating ideas in discussion. A large percentage of the students did not have prior knowledge and did not learn in class about the social integration objectives: participation in student ethnic and cultural organizations, participation in student government and student union organizations, and participation in student athletic organizations. Many other students felt they had learned how to use these resources, but had not attempted to apply that knowledge by the end of their first quarter.

Generally, students agreed that all of the content areas had been covered in class. However, 19 percent of the students felt that improving math skills was not covered, and 16 percent said participation in student cultural/ethnic organizations was not covered when they were in class.

Specific Course Objectives

Overcoming Test Anxiety: Sixty-eight percent of the students said that they had learned to overcome their test anxiety, with 33 percent successfully using the skill and 35 percent trying to use it. However, 19 percent of the students felt that they already had this skill or that test anxiety was not a problem when they entered the course.

Communication Through Written Papers: Sixty-three percent of the students said that they had learned how to communicate their own ideas through written papers or reports, with 26 percent successfully applying this skill and 37 percent attempting to apply it. However, 28 percent of the class thought that they already knew how to express their ideas in a report.

Learning Style: Sixty percent of the students said that they had learned how to identify their learning style and were using this new knowledge and skill (18 percent are successfully using this skill; 42 percent are trying to apply it). Another 20 percent indicated that they had learned about their learning style but had not attempted to apply this knowledge.

How to Study for Tests: Fifty-eight percent of the students felt that they had learned how to study for tests, with 26 percent successfully using and 32 percent trying to apply the skill. Twenty-one percent said that this was previous knowledge.

Time Management: Fifty-seven percent of the students felt that they had learned time management, with 12 percent successfully applying it and 45 percent trying to apply it. Twenty percent said they knew how to manage their time before taking the course.

Planning Class Schedule for the Year: Fifty-seven percent of the students said that they had learned how to plan their schedule, with 36 percent successfully using the skill and 21 percent trying to apply it. Sixteen percent said they had learned but not yet applied the skill.

Using Campus Libraries: Fifty-six percent of the students said they had learned how to use the libraries, with 35 percent successfully using them and 21 percent trying to use them. Another 26 percent had not yet tried to use the libraries, though they felt that they did learn how in the course.

How to Take Tests: Fifty-four percent of the students said that they had learned how to take tests, with 21 percent successfully using this skill and 33 percent trying to apply it. Twenty-six percent felt that they knew how to take tests before they started the Seminar.

Stress Management: Fifty percent of the students felt that they had learned stress management, with 9 percent successfully using the skill and 41 percent trying to apply it. Another 21 percent learned but have not attempted to apply the skill. Twenty percent said they knew how to manage their stress before taking the course.

Use of Campus Tutors: Forty-seven percent of the students said that they learned how to use campus tutors, with 19 percent successfully using this resource, while 28 percent are trying to use it. Thirty-seven percent learned how to use campus tutors, but have not used this knowledge.

Career Planning: Forty-six percent of the students said that they had learned career planning, with 23 percent successfully using and 23 percent trying to apply this skill. Eighteen percent felt they had learned the skill but had not applied it. Twenty-one percent felt they knew how to plan their career prior to the Seminar.

Solving University Red-Tape Problems: Forty-four percent of the students said that they had applied their new skill and knowledge in resolving University administrative and procedural problems, with 19 percent successfully using the knowledge and 25 percent trying to use it. Another 19 percent learned this skill but had not applied it.

Note-Taking: Forty-two percent of the students said that they had learned note-taking, with 16 percent successfully practicing the skill and 26 percent attempting to use it. Forty percent of the students felt that they already know how to take notes when they entered the Seminar.

Improving Math Skills: Forty-two percent of the students said that they had learned how to improve their math skills, with 14 percent successfully using and 28 percent trying to practice these skills. Another 16 percent had learned the skills but not applied them. Sixteen percent felt they knew the improvement techniques prior to the Seminar, and 19 percent felt that they had not been covered in the Seminar when they were present.

Assertiveness: Thirty-two percent of the students felt that they had learned assertiveness (11 percent successfully and 21 percent trying to use). Thirty percent of the students indicated previous knowledge of assertiveness skills. Twenty-one percent said they had learned the skills in the class but had not yet attempted to apply them.

Communicating Ideas Through Class Discussion: Twenty-nine percent of the students said that they had learned how to communicate in class and had applied the skill (7 percent successfully and 21 percent trying). An additional 23 percent

acquired the skill but never applied it. Thirty-eight percent felt they had this skill prior to the class.

Use of Career Development Resources: Twenty-five percent of the students learned how to use career development resources, with 11 percent successfully using them and 14 percent trying to use them. An additional 47 percent learned how to use these resources but have not yet tried to do so.

Participation in Student Athletic Organizations/Events: Twenty-one percent of the students said they learned how to participate in student athletic resources, with 3 percent successfully using these resources and 17 percent attempting to use them. Thirty-three percent felt they had learned how to use these resources and did not learn how to use them in the Seminar. Twenty-one percent felt that they knew how to use the athletic resources before the Seminar.

Participation in Student Ethnic/Cultural Organizations/Events: Eighteen percent of the students learned how to participate in student ethnic/cultural resources and used this knowledge (5 percent successfully and 13 percent trying). Thirty-one percent said they had learned how but had not tried to use the resources. Thirty-one percent said they did not know how to use these resources and did not learn how to use them in class. Sixteen percent felt that this material was not covered in class when they were there.

Participation in Student Government/Union Organizations/Events: Sixteen percent of the students said that they learned how to use student government and organization resources (5 percent successfully using them and 11 percent trying to use them). Another 37 percent said they had learned about but had not tried to use these resources. Twenty-six percent said they did not know how to use these resources and had not learned how to use them in class.

Discussion

The Seminar objectives are student acquisition of knowledge and application of that knowledge. Only three of the twenty objectives were attained by the criterion of 60 percent of the students learning and attempting to apply the skill during the fall quarter. Difficulties in meeting the objectives arise from (1) student-reported previous knowledge of the skill and (2) student acquisition of the skill but failure to use or apply the information or skill

during the fall quarter. The degree of accuracy of student perception of previous knowledge of the skill should be considered in interpreting this data.

There does appear to be significant student learning occurring in the Survival Seminar, as about half of the students indicated a very high degree of learning. Thus the course can be useful for incoming freshmen. However, the facts that only half of the students indicated a very high degree of learning and that a considerable number of students indicated previous skill knowledge do not support requiring the entire course for all students as it is currently structured.

The failure to apply learned skills brings into question the usefulness of the course in assisting students in their adjustment to college. Many of the students said that they had not used a number of the skills or resources during the fall quarter. In addition to the failure to apply a skill, the failure to ask for needed help and assistance in academic matters is troublesome. This can be viewed as a failure to use available resources, but the reluctance to ask for help should also be examined as a problem in adjustment to college and a barrier to academic success.

Recent research has shown social integration to be an important characteristic of students who persist in college and complete their degrees. It is unfortunate that students both did not have prior knowledge of how to participate in many student organizations and activities and did not learn this in the course. Another large group of students learned how to participate, but have not yet applied the skill by participating in a student organization.

Recommendations

1. Reduce the significant and apparent overlap between course content and student prior knowledge. Revision of the course content could reduce the overlap. Some topics could be dropped from the syllabus, learning time for more in depth study (or application) of the existing list of skills and resources or for the addition of new skills. Another possibility is screening or testing students at registration or early in the quarter for skills in the twenty content areas, with students "testing out" of certain units where they indicate knowledge and

application of the skill. If students do not have the skills they think they do, possibly a change in the format would disguise the lesson and prevent students from tuning out or cutting class because they think they already know a skill.

2. Increase the opportunities to apply skills and use resources as a part of the course. Students frequently noted that they were "trying" to apply a skill or use a resource, rather than "successfully" using it. Many other students indicated knowledge of a skill which they had not tried to use. Changes in the course format or the type of assignments may increase these opportunities. Students with a knowledge base could be asked to teach or tutor others in the class who lack that knowledge, under the assumption that to be able to teach how to use the skill, the student will also have to practice or apply it. Additional course requirements could be joining a student organization or serving on a student committee, and seeking tutoring for their "worst" subject that quarter. Application experiences may increase students' confidence in their ability to apply a skill, may make their use of that skill or resource a habit, and thus may really improve their adjustment to college life.

3. Consider screening based on ability to write a research paper. A large portion of the course time and grade is devoted to the research paper. The diversity of skill (already knew vs. learned in Seminar) in the Communicating Ideas Through Written Reports objective could be responsible for some of the low student motivation or course rating. Screening students for writing skill to direct admission to different sections of the Seminar may improve the Seminar by tailoring each section to the writing ability levels of particular students.

4. Consider using learning styles as the context for applying the skill and resource objectives. The learning style objective appears to be useful for students, with little overlap of previous knowledge but in need of more attention to its application. This could be a format for learning or applying other objectives within the course. Learning to take notes or write a paper that fits with one's learning style may be viewed as more interesting and as a new skill, rather than as a repetition of something learned in high school.

5. Increase the emphasis on social integration objectives in the Seminar. Students often noted that they did not learn to use student activity resources, or if they learned how, they did not actually use these resources. Building application exercises into the curriculum (e.g., going to a ball game with a friend, joining a homecoming committee or Rovers, et cetera) would get students to take the first step. Going with a classmate might add social support.

6. Consider ways to capitalize on the instructor/student rapport. The instructors are one of the strengths of the Seminar, yet a good deal of the actual "instruction" is from guest lecturers and other media. Look for roles the instructor could play in the Seminar (and outside of class) that would work to enhance student achievement of the objectives.

7. Consider adding an objective relating to recognizing when students need help and seeking it (before they get too far behind or completely lost).

Many students are reluctant to ask questions for clarification or to ask for help, on the assumption that admitting they don't know indicates they are stupid. Building in the expectation that students will see the instructor for help on various projects (as well as working with other students when they need help) and that asking questions is a positive attribute could be worked in as part of the class format.