Preliminary Report on First Year Experience Student Survey for Fall 2011

History
We have surveyed first year students about their fall experiences from the end of November or early December through February in 2008, 2009, and 2011. The 2008 survey had different answer choices so results are not totally comparable. That said, overall student responses seem relatively stable over time. There were 185 completed surveys about Fall 2011.

Surprising result about academic integrity
There was, comparing 2009 and 2011 student responses, a decrease rather than an increase in student perception that developing an understanding of academic integrity was a strong focus of their first year seminar class. This result is somewhat surprising because first year seminar faculty used a pre and posttest measure related to academic integrity for the first time in Fall 2011. However, of course, we don’t really care as much whether students (in the wording of the question responses) thought “academic integrity” was a “primary” or “extensive and comprehensive” focus as about whether they know what we want them to know about it.

Responses to new questions
This year we added new questions about the first year reading and theme.

The good news first: 46% of responding students indicate they read the entire first year common reading book, Shoeless Joe.
--according to student reports, 46% of students read the entire book. Counting that 46%, 63% read half or more of the book. Of responding students, 25% read only a few pages or none of the book.

The mixed news (the first year seminar group’s syllabus review will provide better data): 36% of student respondents said their first year seminar used the common reading, 46% said it did not, and 18% did not know.

The worse bad news: while sports and society, or sports in America, or at least sports were the most common things students entered for the first year theme, relatively few students could identify the theme at all.
18 wrote in sports and society or sports in America or something much like that
10 wrote in just sports
52 wrote in the title or theme of their first year seminar
13 wrote in the name of the book
12 wrote in something about following a dream, sports and dreams, goals, hardships
17 wrote in something general, like learning how to survive college or general studies

Given the work we do to advertise the first year theme, it might be good if more than 10% of students could identify it at the end of fall term. Likely, even fewer first year students entering in the spring would be able to identify the theme. The question, however, was difficult and its wording may have confused students. It was an open-ended question, “The theme for first year classes this year was ____” which might have prompted some of them to think of the theme for their seminar--we can try wording the question better in future.

The first year seminar faculty can discuss whether they are ok with the percentage of faculty using the book (informed with the better data from the syllabus review) and with the percentage of students reading the book. Given the more narrow focus of this year’s book (Shoeless Joe) and theme, Sports and Society, it is likely that next year’s reading will be used by more faculty. Next year’s reading will be a collection of essays, This I Believe, and the theme will be Believe it or Not. Next year more faculty might use the book, and students identifying the book will be identifying the theme. On the other hand, a lower percentage of students might read the whole book as it is not a narrative. We can note next year how
the changed circumstances might affect survey results and the syllabus review. First Year Council members have argued that next year may pose a best case scenario for faculty assigning the book and students identifying the theme, and that if the latter goes badly next year we may consider dispensing with a theme and instead only have a common reading, or other changes.

How the student survey data has been/might be used
Results of the IDEA group summary report and the 2009 student survey and syllabus review were discussed by first year seminar faculty in Spring 2010. Results assured first year seminar faculty that most of them are assigning both writing and oral communication practice and that students note this and think they are progressing in both areas. The group summary also indicated that first year seminar faculty do not receive lower student ratings, helping debunk a local myth. The survey data also showed that first year seminar faculty might do more in areas like encouraging attendance at campus events, but the 2011 data does not show improvement in those areas. On the other hand, first year seminar faculty have limited time in which to focus on both the behavioral goals in the survey and on the academic goals they've agreed to as a group, and the emphasis in recent years has been to focus on the academic goals as a priority. The First Year Council and First Year Seminar Faculty may need to revisit survey questions in light of what they think students really can reasonably focus on in their first year seminars.

Despite our comparatively high retention rates, Stockton's internal data demonstrates room for improvement in the orientation of our first year students to college life that justifies and has led to the passing of the FRST proposal by the Faculty Senate and spending of resources on professional development and changes in Academic and Student Affairs. As FRST is launched, more connections to precepting, living/learning communities, and other efforts may help the burden of learning about so many disparate things fall more evenly across a wider range of courses and across Student Affairs experiences. And/or groups may choose to narrow their objectives to what is actually achievable.