

Evaluation of Sequim High School Accreditation Survey Findings

October 2001

Prolog: Detailed survey results are presented in their entirety on preceding pages so that readers can formulate their own views about the problems and strengths of Sequim High School. Here follows a summary of the primary investigator's findings. Just as individuals viewing a complex event typically notice different aspects, what the reader finds noteworthy may differ from the author's findings. This should be viewed as the benefit gained when multiple minds work in parallel to perceive strengths and problems in order to propose improvements.

Findings from Multiple Choice Surveys

While all groups of students (both past and current) ranked their education by Sequim High School as slightly better than acceptable (i.e., average), a few areas suggest problems:

- **Substance abuse** was the greatest problem identified by all groups. This is consistent with the annual survey of current students asking about drug and alcohol usage. (But individual comments discussed later and consideration of prior drug education efforts raise questions both about the validity of this conclusion and the wisdom of making this a prime accreditation goal.) Surveys measure perceptions so it is conceivable that a proactive substance abuse program may have raised awareness resulting in the problem being perceived more severe when surveyed. It is difficult using a multiple choice survey to determine how much of the perceived problem is due to heightened awareness, and how much is due to actual substance abuse.
- Current students believe their studies are often not relevant to their lives. The **relevance of course content** was rated worse by Running Start students who considered it a major reason for choosing to leave Sequim High School. Running Start students felt the content of community colleges classes was much superior. (A separate study by math teacher Linda Finch and the author sheds another perspective on this claim. They find that a large portion of Running Start students from Sequim enroll in few advanced mathematics, science, vocational or technical courses at Peninsula Community College. Few students choose courses that would either provide preparation for further college studies or for vocational/technical jobs. Their finding is that most Sequim students seem to choose Running Start as an easier, more time-flexible, more hassle-free way to achieve a high school diploma.) Graduates were more satisfied with the relevance of course content, with 5 year graduates very satisfied. It is not clear whether satisfaction increases as

students find more of their education really is relevant to their adult lives, or whether education is becoming less relevant. It appears that student perception that course content is irrelevance is a problem that needs to be addressed. While running start students selected getting “free college education” as their top reason for doing Running Start, only 46% could list even a vague idea of what job, vocation, or career field they hoped to enter. All groups encourage the district to offer more college credit courses on the high school campus. This is preferred to AP preparation courses.

- Perhaps related, survey of graduates noted a declining satisfaction with both the “amount of homework” and the **”value of assigned homework.”** Running Start students rated these as the worst aspects of Sequim High School and much worse than assigned at community college. (Current students on the NSSE survey rated “homework helps learning” as slightly positive, perhaps due to the difference of the question asked!) Comments suggested much of high school homework was busywork. While students consider cheating to be infrequent, they routinely copy homework from others but do not consider that cheating! (Written comments discussed later shed a different perspective: Several proposed that their objection to the current homework was not necessarily a request for less homework, but a desire for MORE instructive, relevant homework in exchange for less busywork!) All groups strongly supported offering more courses in the high school offering college credit. (The author’s previous efforts to arrange college credit for advanced academic courses failed.) “Liking the challenge of advanced courses” was the second ranked reason students left high school for Running Start.
- The NSSE survey asked if the “school was safe and orderly” (and received a positive rating), but didn’t directly ask about disruptions. More recent graduates were less positive that “disruptions were minimized,” and for Running Start students, **disruptions** nearly tied for third as the biggest difference between high school and community college. A number of Running Start students indicated that getting away from the disruptions by other classmates was nearly as important as “free college education” which was their top reason for leaving high school. Some thought that a “school within a school” could help this problem, while many view Running Start as their personal solution! But there seems to be little school support for such a proposal.
- Current students also noted a problem with school spirit, a feeling that they **don’t fit in**, and that students are not involved in school decision making. (Comments suggested that there is a lack of tolerance for people who are different in appearance, clothes, religion, ideas, and sexual preferences that is permitted and

sometimes shared by teachers.) Two “course content” survey items asked about “moral and ethical training” and “learning to get along.” These were rated lower than other “course content” items by both graduates and Running Start students. A number of Running Start students suggested that public schools should NOT teach morals or ethics, and 35% said “learning to get along” was not part of ANY of the courses they studied at Sequim High School. (Written comments suggest that their objection is against faculty teaching their own personal religion and cultural biases rather than an objection to teaching about honesty and such.) A number of Running Start students noted less intolerance and an absence of cliques at community college. To be treated as an adult with increased freedom and responsibilities were the 3rd, 5th, and 6th ranked reasons for leaving high school for Running Start. Getting away from the childish high school rules (one student characterized as “having to get permission to go the the bathroom”) was ranked 9th.

Findings from Individual Written Responses

As already noted in previous parentheses, written survey comments paint a somewhat different picture of the High School from the multiple choice selections. For example, this and previous multiple choice surveys consistently suggest that drug and alcohol use “is not rare.” The very negative survey ranking implied that substance abuse is the biggest school problem! But in over 150 returned locally constructed surveys asking for school problems to be described, only two Running Start students even mentioned drugs or alcohol as a problem: One student described Peninsula Community College as “drug free” and the other student suggested that drugs and alcohol may be less of a problem at Sequim High School than at larger schools! If drug and alcohol use is the greatest of the High School’s problems, it is troubling that it warranted almost no written concern.

- The school and community’s concerns about alcohol usage has been long and persistent. In 1964-65, the year before the author arrived in Sequim, many athletes were suspended for alcohol use, the school adopted a number of new regulations, and the Superintendent and Principal chose to retire. For several generations the DARE program has been a part of Sequim School curriculum. Students have been asked to take drug usage surveys for many years. The athletic teams have had increasingly rigorous penalties for drug or alcohol use. The administration initiated random breathalyzer tests at events such as dances. A couple years ago the School Board enacted even tougher drug and alcohol policies and instituted random drug testing. (The random testing has been abandoned since the surveys were completed.) In such a situation, it would be difficult for a student not to be aware of the concern about drugs and alcohol. It would be reasonable for a student to perceive that drug and alcohol usage must

be a large problem based solely on the prevailing school regulations, instruction, surveying and testing. It was noted earlier that one of the uncertainties of survey results was the tendency for respondents to mark multiple choice questions by preconceived impressions. The strong school and community concern about drug and alcohol use could be partly responsible for the impression that Sequim High School has a large drug and alcohol problem.

- Another possible interpretation of the lack of written mention of drug and alcohol use is that the usage is an effect of more fundamental problems, rather than a primary cause. If true, toughening of substance abuse policies and other direct efforts to reduce drug and alcohol use may only drive usage underground rather than cure the primary causes. Failure to address the fundamental problems could result in the continued ongoing usage without reduction despite a long history of local reduction efforts.

Whatever the reason for the troubling lack of written mention of drugs and alcohol, the faculty might be cautious about choosing this as a primary focus for accreditation efforts. The many previous school efforts on this issue have apparently had little lasting effect on the problem.

Graduates and Running Start participants indicated other problems that are consistent between survey parts:

- Advisory classes were supported with the hope they might help develop student goals and develop relevancy of instruction. Both multiple choice responses and written comments were harsh about counseling. As the accreditation process got underway, the school started PACK classes twice a month which were intended to address both anticipated State outcome requirements and to improve guidance and counseling by involving every certificated employee with a small group of students over four years. From the outset there was opposition toward required community service or portfolios as potential “busy work.” Considerable apprehension developed among many students and some faculty that PACK was ineffective at meeting student needs and became just more “busy work.” Because of each session’s assigned lesson plans and the long time between sessions, many teacher never understood their PACK students’ problems and needs. The current plan is to restrict PACK to a quarterly development of a portfolio supervised by a “homeroom teacher” that better knows each student. The problem of effectively guiding students remains. The counselors, like other faculty members, have little way to understand each course currently taught, have the enormous task of understanding the often technical requirements of the world’s diverse jobs and occupations, and very little time to meet and understand the needs of each student. Still the comparison of what Sequim High School students study in grades 11 and 12 with enrollment in Running Start courses suggests that Sequim High School students receive much sounder guidance. Perhaps guidance can be improved by more emphasis of job benefits and requirements by each

teacher who presumably has some understanding of occupations relating to their expertise, enhanced communication between counselors and teachers, and enhancement of the existing career day by advanced communication between speakers and teachers of related subjects.

- Wide spread harassment was identified coming from both cliques and individuals, and intolerance of sexual, religious and philosophical and cultural differences, including subtle intolerance by the faculty. In some cases such as the school dress and pda (personal display of affection) codes, some students believe the harassment is institutionalized, unnecessary, and detrimental to the rest of their education. It may be relevant to again consider that for all students to receive an effective education, it is probably necessary to address the difficulties of the minorities.
- Low standards and mediocrity were identified as problems. Student and graduates devalue most homework as busy work while suggesting the amount of useful homework should greatly increase. The faculty should consider that in some cases students may be correct, while in other cases communication about the value of the assigned work may have failed. These are both problems that the faculty could address.
- The curriculum needs to better prepare students for the world (including useful sex education) while eliminating its male, European, one-religion, moral crusade. The multiple choice surveys identified a difficulty with moral and ethical training. But the written comments express concern that faculty (perhaps accidentally?) impose their religion and cultural views while not being tolerant of differing views.
- There seemed to be a consensus that the school needs to be an environment that fosters thinking, analysis, growth and development, not represses and punishes differences.

Findings based on Employer Surveys:

While only 20% of the employers obtain and use high school transcripts for hiring employees, the ones who occasionally did found the transcripts provided useful information. Furthermore, employers who hired graduates based on transcript information found their employees more competent! And employers who did not use transcripts for hiring, by their own evaluation found their employees less competent. The single employer who was equally successful at hiring qualified employees, only hired kids they knew personally! While one employer worried that kids might change once they left school, information provided by transcript of skills demonstrated in school helped employers find more competent employees. Transcripts were particularly useful for finding employees who show up to work when needed, are reliable, and communicate effectively. A number of employers were not aware that they could see a transcript of an applicant's school records. One suggested applicants should bring a transcript along when applying for a job. Perhaps the school should actively educate employers about the advantages of using transcripts and streamline the process if difficulties are encountered.

Since portfolios were being considered as a requirement for graduation, we asked if employers thought portfolios should be required of all students. While 70% agreed, agreement was closer to "neutral" with NOT a single "strong support." One employer was concerned that information be provided with consistency. Integrity and reliability were repeated concerns of employers. Because the school prepares transcriptions, a transcript assures a reliability and integrity of records not possible in portfolios of work. Since several employers suggested that obtaining and using transcripts is too time consuming, employers likely would find multiple page portfolios even worse. Two suggested that our traditional scholarship notebooks (including transcripts, student's goals, honors and awards) were ideal for what a portfolio should be. The nature of portfolios used in some artistic fields to seek employment may be substantially different from the portfolios compiled for PACK assignments.

Employers thought the following information would be valuable (in descending order of importance) for hiring employees: attendance records, technological proficiencies, teacher recommendations, extra curricular activities, discipline actions, course grades, course descriptions, honors and awards, and community service.

Findings of Survey on Student Learning Goals

The recent (2001) NSSE survey evaluating goals for student learning found all areas to be within half a standard deviation of the average rating of 2.13 which NSSE describes as "performing fairly well." The poorest met goal (rated 1.81, only slightly less the others) was "Students demonstrate an understanding of and responsibility for global and environmental issues" but this also was tied for the largest standard deviation (0.96) indicating the largest (but still only moderate) disagreement whether this goal was met or not. The survey could be interpreted as finding no goals that need special, new attention.

That survey also sampled the level of priority that each goal should receive

for improvement. All goals were within a half standard deviation of the average rating of 3.08, defined as “high priority.” This means that the respondents consider all goals to be equally important. That is, the school should consider (1) learning to learn skills, (2) expanding and integrating knowledge, (3) communication skills, (4) thinking and reasoning, (5) interpersonal skills, and (6) personal and social responsibility to be equally important goals for student learning.

Findings on Instruction & Organization Effectiveness

The recent (2001) NSSE survey evaluating instructional and organizational effectiveness found the quality of all instructional systems to be within a half standard deviation of the average rating of 2.39 which NSSE describes as “respondents perceive their school to be performing fairly well.”

The survey questions indicating quality of organizational systems found all systems to be within 2/3 standard deviation of the average rating of 2.38 which NSSE describes as “respondents perceive their school to be performing fairly well.” The two lowest organizational systems, “Commitment to Professional Development” (rated 1.81), and “Develops School wide Plans for Improvement” (rated 1.89) also had the largest standard deviations (0.91) indicating moderate disagreement. The district conducts quarterly half day inservice, but some faculty regard them as generally ineffective at solving school problems.

It is noted that the recent surveys detected few of the deficiencies found earlier by both NSSE surveys and the locally constructed surveys. This might be due to the broad, general questions asked in the recent surveys that did not pertain to or reminded respondents of known problems. There were no questions which asked about cheating, disruptions, harassment, homework, or guidance.

Conclusions

There is consensus that Sequim High School needs to address the following:

DEVELOP READING SKILLS OF ALL STUDENTS

- The faculty wishes to maintain a continuing commitment to develop the reading skills of all students but particularly help those who read poorly.

COMMUNICATE SCHOOL AND ASSIGNMENT RELEVANCY

- **Make course content relevant**, especially homework. This may be partly a content problem and partly a communication problem. Lack of communication is also a problem felt by parents and employers.

STOP HARASSMENT AND DEVELOP TOLERANCE

- **Harassment must be ended** from both cliques and individuals, as does intolerance of sexual, religious and philosophical and cultural differences, including both subtle and institutionalized intolerance by the faculty.

AVOID DOMINATION BUT MAINTAIN HIGH EXPECTATIONS

- **Students must be treated as mature people**, including high expectations of achievement and appropriate, constructive behavior, and consideration and tolerance for their ideas and differences. Perhaps school and classroom rules might be modified and relaxed as students proceed to higher grades in a graduated transition to adult treatment.

ELIMINATE DISRUPTIONS

- **Disruptions** of education, especially by students, must be eliminated. One Running Start student “noted there are no disruptions in classes (at college) for faculty to minimize.” The Superintendent proposed block scheduling with longer class periods partly to reduce disruptions. But evidence of superior educational results from block scheduling is lacking; that proposal has only token faculty support. The Gates Foundation proposes creating “smaller autonomous schools within each large high school” because evidence suggests that smaller schools have less disruptions and improved education. That proposal also seems to have little faculty support. Faculty members have suggested that disruption is closely related to lack of attendance and have suggested an attendance policy. Disruptive students are often those who are “lost” and unable to do assigned tasks. The school has recently adopted an attendance policy whereby students who are absent from class more than 15 days a semester will be removed from the class with a failing grade. As typical with new policies, there are implementation difficulties.

ENHANCE STAFF SKILLS

- While Sequim does not have a strong track record for supporting relevant staff development and funding to meet prior accreditation goals, it is understood that appropriate staff improvement and funding will be essential to meeting accreditation goals. Continued low funding is anticipated.

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