

Sonoma State University Compared to COPLAC Institutions 2004 to 2006

L. Rose Bruce
Institutional Research

Sonoma State University belongs to a COPLAC data consortium. Each year we provide extensive data on our institution. This report compared SSU to the COPLAC average on these indicators of academic quality.

Admissions and Student Characteristics

SSU is the second largest COPLAC institution. We receive many more applications compared to the COPLAC average (12,476 compared to 3,292). Our percentage of applicants who are admitted is similar to the COPLACS (around 68%). However our yield rate of admitted applicants who enroll is much lower (22% compared to 42%). Our freshman class is nearly double the average COPLAC. We have slightly more freshmen women (68% to 59%) and fewer males (32% to 41%). Our freshman class is equally diverse (16% to 14%). The ACT and SAT scores for our freshmen are lower than the average COPLAC (ACT 22 compared to 24, SAT Verbal 511 compared to 565, SAT Math 512 compared to 553).

We are similar to the COPLACs with regard to the percent of full-time undergraduates (around 86%, headcount). We have slightly more diverse students and female students. We have more of an in-state population (97% compared to 83%). We have a lower percentage of undergraduates living on campus (35% compared to 42%).

Indicators of Student Achievement

The disciplines of our degrees are representative of other COPLACS: Humanities (28%), Natural Sciences (13%), Social Sciences (35%), Visual and Performing Arts (5%). We give fewer multidisciplinary degrees (1% compared to 12%). Our six year graduation rate is similar to the COPLACS (51% compared to 53%). Our freshman to sophomore retention rate is also equivalent (around 75%).

Faculty and Staff

Because we are a larger institution, we have more faculty and staff than other COPLACS. Our faculty is similar to the COPLAC average on the percent of tenured faculty and percent male or female. Our faculty salaries are slightly higher. Both SSU and COPLAC faculty teach 12 credit units as a full-time load. Our lower-level average class size is higher (34 compared to 24) as is our upper-level average class size (23 compared to 17). The ratio of FTE undergraduate students to FTE faculty is higher (from 23-26:1 compared to 16:1). Our ratio of full-time faculty headcount to full-time nonacademic staff is much lower (35:1 compared to 55:1).

Fiscal Resources and Advancement

The funding per (estimated) FTES can be calculated by adding the student fees and the state appropriations. Our funding is similar to other COPLACs (\$11,954 compared to \$11,088). The expense per FTES is also similar (\$12,114 compared to \$11,637)¹. Our auxiliary enterprises expenditures are equivalent (around \$10,000,000). Our total annual development collections are higher (\$5,767,839 compared to \$3,428,604).

Revenue, Financial Aid, and Related Indicators

Our in-state tuition and fees are lower than other COPLACS (\$3,616 compared to \$5,719) as is our out-of-state tuition and fees (\$10,235 compared to \$13,417). Our annual room and board is higher (\$8,820 compared to \$6,444). Fewer SSU students are on financial aid compared to the COPLAC average (50% compared to 61%).

National Survey of Student Engagement

The National Survey of Students Engagement (NSSE) is a national survey designed to assess the student's engagement with the institution. It gets at the real student experience. We can compare ourselves to both the COPLACs and the Carnegie Peers on this instrument.

A random sample of freshmen and seniors were sent several emails asking them to complete an electronic form of the survey. SSU participated in this survey for the first time in spring 2002 at which time we compared ourselves to other COPLACS. We also administered it in spring 2006 and this report will represent that data set. We have just administered it again this spring 2008 but the results won't be back until late summer. In spring 2006 we had a high response rate of 335 freshmen (28% of the sample) and 287 seniors (24% of the sample). Although students self-selected to answer this survey, so it is not strictly random, it does provide some guidance about students' engagement in SSU. Along with the responses for each questions, NSSE provides "benchmark" comparisons which are clusters of similar items. This report will focus on the benchmark comparisons. The statistical significance is given for each mean comparison. The Effect Size is also reported. This is a measure of "practical significance" and represents the mean difference divided by the comparison group standard deviation (.2 is small, .5 is moderate, and .8 is large).

Level of Academic Challenge

The level of academic challenge is determined by items that deal with preparation for class; the number of textbooks assigned; the number of papers written; skills taught in the classroom such as critical thinking, synthesis, and making judgments; working hard to

¹ This is the sum of IPEDS instruction, academic support, student services, institutional support, and operations of physical plant divided by the FTES.

meet instructor's expectations; and time studying. As seen in Table 1, the level of academic challenge for both the freshmen is statistically significantly lower for SSU

Table 1 Level of Academic Challenge							
	SSU	COPLAC			Carnegie Peers		
	Mean	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size
Freshmen	49.4	51.7	$p < .01$	-.18	51.0	$p < .05$	-.12
Seniors	55.5	56.8			55.6		

compared to both the COPLACs and the Carnegie peers. However, the Effect Size is small so we conclude that there is not practical significance to this difference. The level of academic challenge for the seniors is equivalent to the COPLACs and Carnegie Peers.

Active and Collaborative Learning

The active and collaborative learning benchmark includes items about asking questions in class, making a class presentation, working with other students inside and outside of class, community-based projects, and discussing course ideas outside of class. As seen in Table 2, scores for both the freshmen and seniors are equivalent for SSU, the COPLACs, and the Carnegie Peers.

Table 2 Active and Collaborative Learning							
	SSU	COPLAC			Carnegie Peers		
	Mean	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size
Freshmen	41.1	41.0			41.6		
Seniors	52.1	51.0			51.4		

Student-Faculty Interaction

Items on the student-faculty interaction benchmark involve discussing assignments with faculty outside of class, talking about career plans with a faculty member or advisor, working with faculty on co-curricular activities, receiving prompt feedback from faculty, and working with faculty on a research project outside of class.

Table 3 Student-Faculty Interaction							
	SSU	COPLAC			Carnegie Peers		
	Mean	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size
Freshmen	30.5	32.4			32.2		
Seniors	37.9	45.1	$p < .001$	-.34	41.3	$p < .001$	-.16

The freshmen mean is equivalent to the COPLACs and Carnegie Peers for the student-faculty interaction benchmark (see Table 3). However, SSU seniors scored statistically significantly lower than the COPLACs and Carnegie Peers. The Effect Size for the COPLAC comparison is -.34, nearing moderate. The Effect Size for the Carnegie Peers is small, -.16.

Enriching Educational Experiences

Enriching Educational Experiences includes co-curricular activities, community service or volunteer work, study abroad, independent study, capstone senior experiences, conversations with other students about ethnic and religious beliefs, using the internet to discuss or complete assignments, diverse campus environment (economic, social, racial or ethnic), and learning communities.

Table 4 Enriching Educational Experiences							
	SSU	COPLAC			Carnegie Peers		
	Mean	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size
Freshmen	26.1	26.8			25.7		
Seniors	36.2	42.0	$p < .001$	-.33	38.2	$p < .01$	-.12

On this benchmark, SSU freshmen are equivalent to the COPLACs and Carnegie Peers. SSU seniors, however, are statistically lower than the COPLACs and Carnegie Peers. The Effect Size of -.33 for the COPLAC comparison is nearing moderate but is small for the Carnegie Peers (-.12).

Supportive Campus Environment

A supportive campus environment provides support to help students succeed academically, cope with non-academic responsibilities, and thrive socially. It also includes a high quality of relationships with other students, faculty, and staff.

Table 5 Supportive Campus Environment							
	SSU	COPLAC			Carnegie Peers		
	Mean	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size	Mean	Sig.	Effect Size
Freshmen	56.3	59.2	$p < .01$	-.07	59.3	$p < .01$	-.16
Seniors	54.6	57.7	$p < .001$	-.18	57.4	$p < .001$	-.15

SSU freshmen and seniors score lower on this benchmark compared to both the COPLACs and the Carnegie Peers. However, the Effect Size is small indicating no practical differences.

Discussion

The definition of a COPLAC institution, as taken from their web site, states:

The institutions that make up the Council on Public Liberal Arts Colleges are distinguished by their commitment to provide a superior education to undergraduate students. These selective institutions have been recognized nationally as outstanding in many diverse ways, including small classes, innovations in teaching, personal interactions with faculty, opportunities for faculty-supervised research and supportive atmospheres. Most of these colleges are located on beautiful campuses in rural or small-town settings.

The mission of SSU and the values of the institution support a COPLAC identity. However, from the data consortium we find we are similar to the average COPLAC on some factors and not on others. The questions is: are we similar enough to define ourselves as a COPLAC or are we transitioning to a comprehensive university?

We are the second largest COPLAC institution. Although we have larger classes and student to faculty ratios than the COPLAC average, the student-faculty benchmark from the NSSE indicated no difference for SSU freshmen compared to the COPLACs and Carnegie Peers. However, the score for our seniors compared to COPLACs was of concern. On this measure, we are more like a comprehensive university.

The quality of the student experience is important to inform this discussion. Data from the NSSE indicate similarities between SSU, the COPLACs, and the Carnegie Peers on the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, and supportive campus environment. One area of concern is the level of enriching educational experiences for SSU seniors where we are more like a comprehensive university than a COPLAC.

The NSSE is self-report. It begs the question of how the faculty feels about the NSSE benchmarks and if we are at the level of a COPLAC. Certainly a campus-wide discussion needs to take place about this important issue.

Another issue is that the actual level of learning in General Education for SSU compared to COPLACs and comprehensives has not been measured. The General Education Subcommittee is in the process of identifying student learning outcomes for all areas of G.E. They should have completed this work by the end of the fall 2008 semester. We can then decide how to measure if those learning outcomes are being accomplished. It is possible to use standardized measures of G.E. for comparison purposes. Or SSU may choose to develop its own method of assessment.