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Assessment Matters is a quarterly newsletter produced by the Office of Educational Assessment of The College of Wooster.

Inside AM

Wooster has partnered with Allegheny, Augustana, and Washington Colleges to design a research plan to study the impact of senior capstone research experiences. In this issue of *AM*, read about the planning grant awarded to The College of Wooster by the Teagle Foundation, the second such grant within the last three years.

Daniel F. Chambliss, professor of sociology and Director of the Mellon Project for Longitudinal Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes at Hamilton College, considers whether departmental assessment is relevant to student outcomes in a recent article from *LiberalArtsOnline* summarized in this *AM* newsletter.

Teagle Foundation Planning Grant to Assess Independent Study

In February, The College of Wooster was awarded a multi-institutional planning grant to design a research project to study the impact of senior research capstones upon student learning. Wooster has partnered with Allegheny College in Meadville, PA, Augustana College in Rock Island, IL, and Washington College in Chestertown, MD to study the educational benefits of undergraduate research in the form of a senior capstone that is required of all students. The project is driven by two central questions: What do students gain from the capstone research experience, and how do these gains relate to the broadly defined objectives of a liberal arts education?

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Faculty, staff, and administrators from the four campuses will convene for a three-day workshop during the summer to discuss their respective senior capstone characteristics, resources, and components, to identify research goals and focus research questions, and to discuss a specific set of outcomes. David Lopatto, Professor of Psychology at Grinnell College, and Charles Blaich, Director of Inquiries of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education at Wabash College, will join the group and guide the project. They will assist with refining the research questions, identifying the necessary data, and developing a methodological approach for the study.

The goal of the workshop and the planning grant is to have a fully developed research proposal to assess the impact of Independent Study and other senior research capstones required of all students. The proposal will be submitted to the Teagle Foundation for funding consideration in the fall. Simon Gray, Associate Professor of Computer Science at The College of Wooster, and Timothy Schermer, Director of Institutional Research at Augustana College, will co-direct the planning grant project.

Is Departmental Assessment Relevant to Student Outcomes?

Daniel F. Chambliss, the Eugene M. Tobin Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Hamilton College, wrote “A Neglected Necessity in Liberal Arts Assessment: The Student as the Unit of Analysis,” the September 2007 issue of *LiberalArtsOnline* published by the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. The goal is lots of well-educated students. For those working to achieve that goal and improve student learning, it’s necessary to have the student as the basic unit of analysis in assessing student outcomes.

Chambliss describes two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical, in which we stray from understanding individual student reality. In the horizontal dimension, students do not perceive the world as faculty and

administrators do, and in the vertical dimension, the success of individual students cannot be directly inferred from the success of classes, departments, programs, or the institution. To highlight the horizontal dimension, he refers to the Beloit College mindset list that reminds faculty that today’s first-year students don’t remember the Berlin Wall, the U.S.S.R., or Johnny Carson, and have grown up with bottled water, the World Wide Web, text messaging, and virtual reality. Students hold different opinions and views than faculty as well as an “entirely different place in life.” To avoid the bias inherent in the horizontal dimension, Chambliss recommends communicating with students and designing programs and policies that draw on students’ perceptions and motivations.

Chambliss provides several examples of the vertical dimension in which student outcomes and group-level data can be misunderstood. In many liberal arts colleges, most *classes* are small (because students are not in them), but most *students* are in larger classes. Boasting that a high percentage of classes are small doesn’t mean that most students are in small classes. Furthermore, a large majority of a college’s courses could be evaluated as excellent, but the educational impact may be minor if few students are enrolled in those courses.

Another tangible example of the vertical dimension was the end of distribution requirements at one college with the result that enrollments in science lab courses remained unchanged. The initial conclusion was that eliminating the distribution requirements made no difference in what students studied. However, transcript analyses showed that science majors were taking more science courses and non-science majors were taking less. The class-level data was misleading about what was actually taking place. In these cases information collected at the group-level could not be used to draw similar conclusions about students.

Chambliss concludes with several recommendations for those working to improve student learning. First, begin by sampling on students, not on programs or professors.

Assessment Calendar

Meetings, Events, & Deadlines

- May 5** College of Wooster Assessment Committee Annual Report Presented to the Faculty
- May 14** Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, Letter of Commitment deadline

Department and Program Assessment

- Oct 6** College of Wooster Annual Departmental Assessment Reports deadline

Conferences

- Apr 11-12** **Seventh Annual Mellon Foundation Assessment Conference**
Hamilton, NY
Assessing Creative and Critical Thinking in the Liberal Arts
- Apr 11-15** **NCA Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL**
- Apr 14, 11:00** *Assessing Creative and Critical Thinking Pedagogy in the Liberal Arts*
- Apr 14, 12:00** Roundtable Discussion
- Jun 21-24** **HEDS Annual Conference**
Denver, CO

Submissions to *Assessment Matters*

We are accepting submissions for consideration to be included in *AM*. Please contact Theresa Ford if you wish to submit materials for the newsletter.

Assessment Matters is written by Theresa Ford, Director of Educational Assessment.

Next, he urges an accounting of all students at the college, not segments of the student population. Lastly, he argues that department or program-level assessment may be irrelevant to student outcomes. He notes, for example, that departmental assessment may improve results by excluding weaker students. Although no single department is responsible for the outcomes of all students, each department operates at the expense of students who are not in it. The good news, he argues, is that a small group of outstanding departments and programs, professors, and courses can provide an excellent education to virtually all students, as long as the weakest departments and professors have no students.

To read the full article, click on <http://liberalarts.wabash.edu/cila/liberalartsonline>.

Assessment Briefs

Assessment Committee

The Annual Report of the Assessment Committee will be presented by John Neuhoff, Chair of the committee, during the May 5th Faculty Meeting. The Report is posted on the assessment website as well as minutes from all of the meetings during the 2007-08 academic year.

Assessment Committee Members, Spring 2008
John Neuhoff, Chair, Research & Grants and Psychology

JaQuan Bryant, Student
Theresa Ford, Assessment
Henry Kreuzman, Philosophy
Richard Lehtinen, Biology
Katharine McCarthy, Student

Iain Crawford, VPAA
Simon Gray, Computer Science
Elys Kettling Law, Library
William Macauley, English
Thomas Wood, Music
