ASSESSING AND ENSURING WASHINGTON COLLEGE’S VALUE PROPOSITION
PRESENTED TO THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, BOARD OF VISITORS & GOVERNORS, WASHINGTON COLLEGE
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THE CRITICAL QUESTION

Washington College promises prospective students a transformational learning experience by developing in them habits of analytical thought and clear communication, aesthetic insight, ethical sensitivity, and civic responsibility. From their first year seminar up through their senior capstone experience, we promise that students will develop the skills necessary for independent research and effective writing. We promise students that they will learn how to think through complex problems from multiple disciplinary perspectives. We promise to achieve these outcomes through a broad curriculum of study and by ensuring close connections with faculty within and beyond the traditional classroom. Ultimately, we promise to prepare students for rich and fulfilling lives; for myriad and unpredictable opportunities; for a lifetime of learning, leadership, and productive endeavor.

The critical question is: how do we know we do what we say we do?

ASSESSMENT BASICS

The challenge for the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment is, where possible, to answer this question in ways that are both meaningful and measurable. We admit freely that some of what we say we do—indeed, many of the things we care about most, like a commitment to lifelong learning, moral courage, and other values related to the development of one’s character—do not lend themselves to standard methods of assessment. That said, there are some elements within our value proposition that we can measure, and some of these are critically important to prospective students and their families in selecting a college. It is this intersection upon which we focus in addressing the question: how do we know we do what we say we do?

There are two primary ways to determine the value students receive for their investment. The first is to ask students about the opportunities for growth they have experienced and their satisfaction with what they have gained. This kind of assessment is called “indirect assessment.” The second and more objective approach, what we call “direct assessment,” is to estimate students’ growth in key learning outcomes between their entry and graduation. Indirect assessment is subjective, based on students’ perception of value, while direct assessment relies on empirical demonstration of added value. Both direct and indirect forms
of assessment are important to our central question. Consider, for example, the learning outcomes related to effective writing. A survey of student satisfaction may tell us that students perceive themselves to be effective writers, while direct assessment may indicate that students have not gained significant ground in this area. The reverse, in which students do in fact gain significant ground, but for some reason do not perceive this to be true, can also occur. If we identify a performance or a perception gap, we can then develop strategies for remediating the problem. The specific strategies will depend upon whether we have identified a substantive lack of progress, a perception of a lack of progress, or both. Our efforts will be aimed at achieving positive outcomes in both forms of assessment. Once both indicators are positive, we can be confident that students will report that Washington College helped them to become effective writers, and we can be confident that what they say is actually true.

**Measuring What Matters (a multifaceted approach)**

Our primary focus is on the key areas of cognition and communication. The instruments we describe below are aimed at measuring growth in these areas as a consequence of a Washington College education. Our primary research questions are:

1. Do students improve significantly their writing and speaking skills during their time at the College?
2. Do students gain in their ability to think critically and analytically in order to solve problems and make judgments?

If we are to track and make a targeted impact on cognitive growth and communication skills, it helps tremendously to know what level of preparation our students bring with them, and what they expect from their college experience. To understand how well prepared our students are for taking advantage of the opportunities college affords, and to identify key expectations that either support or detract from college-level learning, we administer the **Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE)**, which asks incoming students about their high school experiences and expectations for college. BCSSE gauges incoming students’ academic preparation in the areas of writing, speaking, solving quantitative problems, and thinking critically and analytically. Complementing the BCSSE’s focus on incoming students, we will also administer a survey of students’ assessment of their growth in their **Senior Capstone Experiences (SCE)**. This survey will be an in-house version of the capstone surveys used in the project funded by the Teagle Foundation in 2010 and 2011. It targets students’ perceptions of the capstone contribution to their development in each of the key areas of writing, speaking, and critical and analytical thinking. An additional source of data on the accomplishment of growth in communication and cognitive skills are the direct assessments of Senior Capstone Experiences conducted at the department level. These assessments capture the writing, speaking, and thinking skills evidenced by students in these culminating projects. If departments add a set of standardized questions in their SCE assessments, results could be compared with the responses to the SCE survey.
One of the most important tools that we use to understand students’ perception of the value of their time at Washington College is the **National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)**. This survey asks first-year and senior students about the nature and quality of their undergraduate experience, inquiring about the frequency of certain academic experiences and intellectual activities. NSSE contributes to our central research questions by obtaining students’ perceptions about the extent to which their academic experience has contributed to their ability to write and speak clearly and effectively. It asks the same of students in the areas of thinking critically and analytically, analyzing quantitative problems, and solving complex real-world problems. The responses from 1 to 4 (the highest) are of particular interest for seniors as they reflect the culmination of four years of study, but it is also useful to see how perceptions change between the end of the first and fourth years.

Between NSSE, BCSSE, and the SCE surveys, we are able to examine several critical factors related to value proposition: How do incoming students’ assess their level of preparedness in these critical skills? What happens to students’ perceptions of the quality of their experience regarding these skills between their first and fourth years? What does the intensive mentored experience of the capstone contribute to their intellectual growth? How does the perceived growth in these skills among Washington College students compare with those of students at other colleges and universities in our peer group and Carnegie class?

Supplementing the NSSE-BCSSE combination is a survey called **Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI)**. Unlike the surveys above, the SSI tells us the degree of importance students assign to various aspects of their college experience. The SSI is thus able to capture performance gaps by asking students to assign a level of importance and a level of satisfaction to various factors. In any given area, the performance gap is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score. As it allows us to target areas that students identify as being most important, but where they are least satisfied, this information can be a valuable tool in our effort to retain students. These performance gaps can also be viewed in relation to those of peer institutions, again allowing us to target our efforts toward the areas that college students (in general) consider to be most important, and where, at Washington College, there is the greatest need for improvement. Regarding the research questions that underlie our value proposition, the SSI does not focus on the particular skills that we are targeting, but it is valuable in giving a picture of the larger context of the students’ development. Among others, the statements to which students respond include: “I am able to experience intellectual growth here.” “There is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus.” “The instruction in my major field is excellent.”
A Closer Look: What can we learn from the most recent BCSSE?

The BCSSE results from the incoming Fall 2015 class demonstrate the range of insights that such surveys can provide, thus some detail will be instructive. Asked about their level of preparation, 58 percent of freshmen see themselves as very well prepared for writing clearly and effectively, 62 percent see themselves as well equipped for public speaking, and 64 percent for thinking critically and analytically. By contrast, only 42 percent describe comparable preparation for analyzing numerical and statistical information. Incoming students also claim better preparation for college than previous cohorts. By comparison with the incoming class of 2011, the 2015 class claims better preparation by 10 percentage points in each area and reported more study time in high school. Among the incoming 2011 students, 31 percent expected that learning course material at the college would be very difficult, while in 2015 only 17 percent expected this level of difficulty.

A specific action that these data suggest is to ensure that First Year Advisors and faculty are briefed on the shifts in incoming students’ perspectives regarding their readiness for college-level work, the increase they report in their average study time in high school, and the gap they identify in their confidence in analyzing quantitative information. Advisors who are aware of the pronounced tendency of entering students to see themselves as well prepared for writing and critical thinking and less prepared for numerical and statistical analysis will be more deliberate in guiding students into entry-level quantitative courses so that they gain confidence in their quantitative analytic skills early on in the college experience. Given better study habits of incoming students, faculty can adjust upward their expectations regarding out-of-class study, but, given the lower level of confidence students have in their quantitative skills, faculty may decide to take more time walking through quantitative materials. Faculty and advisors can also build upon the confidence students have regarding their writing and critical thinking skills by frequently reinforcing how projects they assign develop these core elements of a liberal education.

These insights into the academic preparation of incoming students provide context for the growth (or lack of growth) students will report later in their college career. Because we can tie specific students’ BCSSE responses to their GPAs over time, we can test whether students’ self-reports of academic preparation align with their actual academic performance. We will be able to measure whether a student’s confidence in their academic abilities is a strong predictor of academic success. Additionally, we can test whether a student’s estimation of their readiness for college-level work impacts their perception of their intellectual growth over time. Further, because we have individual information on students who participated in BCSSE, we can compare their incoming estimation of their readiness in both writing and quantitative skills to their relative performance in early writing and math courses. Given that almost two-thirds of the incoming students consider themselves to be well prepared for college-level writing, it will be important for us to understand whether this assessment overestimates their preparedness and if so, whether this overestimation leads them to understate the College’s contribution to their growth as writers.
One of the downsides of the indirect assessment tools outlined above is that we are not able to ask our own questions and so focus on aspects of WC culture that might be of interest. The reason for this is that the standardized questions permit institutions participating in them to compare themselves with each other. In our last administration of NSSE in 2012, Washington College freshmen and seniors rated their entire experience halfway between good (3) and excellent (4). These responses were on par with students at peer institutions, small liberal arts colleges in the US News top 100. On the other hand, the college scored lower than peers on aggregate measures of enriching educational experiences, including internships, volunteer work, and co-curricular activities. In subsequent years, based in part on these data, improvements have been made in these areas. The next administration of NSSE, scheduled for the spring of 2016 will lend insight as to whether these efforts have allowed us to gain ground.

These assessments of student engagement and satisfaction do not factor into the US News ranking formula. But they do have the potential to move the needle on alternative rankings that are more closely attuned to the student experience. One that we should particularly keep in mind is the Colleges that Changes Lives guide founded by Loren Pope. Among other features of the forty colleges on its list, this organization highlights the following: “An ideal living and learning environment where students can meet and exceed their own expectations for personal intellectual growth.” Rankings such as this place high value on the student’s perception of intellectual growth and reward the institutions that make these data explicit and public. NSSE results are also used in a number of large-scale studies that link students’ experiences with their learning and development. The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education has found evidence of significant associations between the five main NSSE benchmarks and key student outcomes of effective reasoning and critical thinking, when controlling for pre-college variables.\(^1\) Another study by the Center for Postsecondary Research found positive relationships between engagement and persistence to the second year, again holding pre-college variables constant.\(^2\)

A knowledge gap remains if we are limited to the surveys described above. Such surveys provide a relatively clear picture of students’ perception of growth, but on their own, they do not provide the global direct assessment needed to measure and justify our value proposition. If we were to rely on these alone, we would not be able to counter the reasonable objection that student self-reporting can be unreliable. That is, students may perceive more intellectual growth than has actually taken place, or they may miss growth that has taken place. Beginning in 2016, we propose to add the CLA+ to our assessment slate. The CLA+ (previously the Collegiate Learning Assessment) is a test of analytic reasoning, critical

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thinking, problem solving, and written communication skills. This assessment tool will bolster our value proposition by providing clear and objective evidence of the gains students make in their time at Washington College. It does this by sampling and testing students who are entering and exiting in a given year and quantifying the difference in performance. Institution or program-level scores are reported both in terms of observed performance and as value added beyond what would be expected from entering students’ SAT scores. We are also able to track responses of individual students over time so we can determine the gains that particular cohorts make over time.

The CLA+ may enable the College to demonstrate our strengths relative to more selective institutions, particularly with regards to value added. First, there is an opportunity to stand out from the crowd by showing any substantial gains at all. In a report on the 2013-14 results, the Council for Aid to Education (which administers the CLA+) found that out of 32,000 students at 169 colleges and universities who participated, 40 percent of college seniors did not demonstrate complex reasoning skills. In addition, more elite institutions have higher average incoming scores and so have a higher bar for showing added value. While more selective colleges may get higher average scores from both freshmen and seniors, the gains that they show are smaller than those shown by graduates of less elite colleges. Our enrollment strategy involves placing calculated bets on certain students who would not gain entry to more elite colleges but can thrive at Washington College given the opportunities we offer for close mentoring and academic support. In other words, we have good reason to believe that institutions like ours really do change lives. The CLA+ provides a vehicle for objectively assessing the validity of this belief.

The CLA+ test is performance-based and open-ended, rather than multiple choice, so it requires 90 minutes to complete. In the section titled “Performance Task,” participants are given a real-world scenario and asked to recommend an action based on information provided in a set of documents. The test does not require knowledge of any particular field and is designed to assess skills regardless of academic concentration. Given its length and difficulty, we will need to incentivize participation by approximately 100 students each from the first-year and senior classes. The enrollment price per student is $38 (with discounts for multi-year contracts). For 200 students, the cost would be $7600, though incentives for participation would bring the total cost to approximately $13,000.

Finally, the assessment of our value proposition must include meaningful measures of career outcomes. Students who graduate with the thinking, writing and speaking skills that we promise will be highly marketable and will have the tools to thrive in the workplace. Our annual Senior Cap and Gown Survey is administered at graduation and coupled with a follow-up survey six months after graduation. We use the resulting dataset to determine the rate at which graduates gain immediate employment or admission to graduate school. We also ask graduates to rate their overall satisfaction with their undergraduate education and their likelihood of choosing Washington College if they were to make the choice again. This survey gives an immediate snapshot of students’ entrance into the job market, but it lacks a sense of the longer-term career trajectory. It also does not show us how the skills of
thought and communication that graduates developed at the College can be leveraged for success in the workplace.

Similarly, the Gallup-Purdue Index is a national study that asks alumni directly whether their college education was worth the cost and attempts to determine how financial burden and specific undergraduate experiences shaped these perceptions. A central finding of this study is that half of the alumni surveyed strongly agreed that their college education was worth the cost. Notably, factors such as close connections between faculty mentors and students, active engagement with co-curricular activities, student leadership opportunities, campus-employment and/or high-impact internship experiences, and long-term thesis projects—factors that loom large in the Washington College experience—are the primary drivers in alumni strongly agreeing that their education was worth the costs. While this is good to know, and can help us articulate the value proposition to prospective students, it would be even better to know how experiences like these lead to career and personal success in the years following graduation.

Not only do we want to know whether our graduates see their Washington College education as worth the investment, but where and how the skills, tools, and values they honed here were turned to productive and meaningful ends. In order to improve this longer-term career picture, we propose a scientifically rigorous qualitative study of graduates who have been in the workplace for 5 to 10 years. This study would involve in-person or phone interviews with graduates from multiple industry sectors (e.g., for profit, non-profit, government service, education, law, and medicine) with the aim of understanding how the skills of analytical thought and effective communication are turned to the complex problems of the world of work. Because of its reliance on in-depth interviews, this study would allow us to go beyond the skills of writing, speaking and thinking targeted by the surveys and assessments outlined above, and inquire as well about how capacities for aesthetic insight, ethical sensitivity, and civic responsibility matter in a critical career-building time of life.

Such a project is the gold standard in terms of providing conclusive evidence of the transformational nature of the College’s educational offering. This project would demand a significant resource investment by the Office of Institutional Research, particularly in terms of the time required for qualitative data collection and analysis. Specific costs would include travel for data collection as well as assistance with crafting the sample and transcribing and coding collected material, which would be best done by researchers with graduate-level training. An initial estimate would put the total costs for such a study at about $8,000.

**Assessment Cycle Timing & Costs**

The surveys, tests and qualitative studies outlined above will be administered on a three-year cycle. The NSSE and BCSSE surveys are scheduled for this academic year and the SCE study for next year. If funding can be identified, the CLA+ will be launched in 2016-17, and the SSI will follow in 2017-18. The Cap & Gown survey of the graduating class is administered
annually. Slated for 2017-18, the proposed study of working graduates would be scheduled as a one-time project until its value can be assessed.

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**From Data, to Analysis, to Effective Action**

There is little reason to engage in an ambitious cycle of assessment if we do not translate the data into meaningful analysis that serves as an effective guide to action. A disciplined routine is essential to ensure that relevant stakeholders are presented with the analysis and challenged to identify strategies that will close gaps in perception and performance, celebrate and broadcast success, and refine our research questions and methods.

Hardwired into the Senior Staff schedule will be two check-in points per year in which the Assistant Provost for Institutional Research Victor Sensenig will review the data and analysis, with the tasks of 1) identifying critical questions that the instruments are not yet helping us address, 2) selecting/developing new questions (or new instruments) that can help us fill these knowledge gaps, and 3) developing “close the loop” strategies for improving assessment outcomes. As performance and perception gaps are identified, members of Senior Staff will work with the appropriate faculty, staff, offices, and standing committees to further develop and execute these strategies for improvement.

The assessment cycle proposed above will support the College’s value proposition by examining student growth in areas central to our mission, and by studying the student experience at every point in his or her college career, from entry to well after graduation. The findings from these efforts serve two distinct but complementary functions. Used internally, the data and analysis will provide a candid reality check on whether and where we are delivering on what we promise to prospective students, and where we need to improve. Used externally, the data and analysis will enable the College to develop a compelling and credible case for why a Washington College education is worth the investment.