

Gettysburg College

ASSESSMENT PLAN FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES

Report of the
Subcommittee on
Academic Program Assessment

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G E T T Y S B U R G C O L L E G E

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John Dewey once described schooling as “a heightened form of living.” This “height” is produced in part by the fact that a school is an intentional place, a deliberately constructed community that is aimed at learning. Teaching – the most obvious activity of schools – is also an intentional activity aimed at learning. Indeed, student learning is the sole measure of success for teaching. However, the teaching of a curriculum is only the most formal model within a range of deliberately structured activities aimed at learning. Other such intentional activities include coaching; master/apprentice relationships; internships; a required residential experience; and a broad spectrum of co-curricular programs, events, and organizations.

It would be folly to pursue any goal-directed activity while being blind to and unconcerned about actual results. Any deliberate activity benefits from the self-consciousness and reflection of the practitioner. Assessment of results provides valuable feedback that confirms outcomes and redirects effort for greater effectiveness; such information allows intelligence to be applied to the pursuit of the goal.

Gettysburg College is, as our Mission Statement declares, an intentional community that is dedicated to the education of undergraduate students. The College provides a full spectrum of activities aimed at learning. We affirm the value – indeed, the necessity – of thoughtful assessment of all these learning-directed activities. **The evaluation of learning outcomes is the central and premier component of our assessment of institutional effectiveness.** While the need to evaluate learning is clear, it is a task long delayed by a preoccupation with the quality of instructional resources, by a focus on the performative aspects of teaching, and by the inherent complexity of the task. Though Gettysburg College has engaged in a myriad of evaluative activities over the years, this Assessment Plan is the first such formal plan for the College. It sets forth assumptions, arrangements, and cycles for a systematic and on-going assessment of student learning at Gettysburg. This plan has the endorsement of the relevant stakeholders and has been developed in response to intense dialogue about assessment issues. Since assessment at its best is self-reforming and evolutionary, this Plan should be understood as a commitment that will itself be reviewed (i.e., assessed) with an eye to the improvement of practice.

BASIC PRINCIPLES AND ASSUMPTIONS

Gettysburg College affirms the following as fundamental principles and presuppositions of our Assessment Plan and the assessment activities it commissions:

Learning Goals

Clearly and fully articulating our shared goals for student learning is the initial and most basic step for our assessment activities. Our intended learning outcomes, our educational goals, can of course change over time. However, this process of expression and endorsement of goals is also a process of discovery and refinement, which means that our understanding of our goals will evolve even without formal curriculum reform. Our learning goals grow from interpretation of the mission of the College itself; they contribute in direct and indirect ways to the ideal of the educated person embedded therein. They may usefully, if somewhat artificially, be categorized as goals for knowledge, skills, and attitudes or values.

Responsibility for Assessment

The responsibility for the assessment of learning rests on anyone and everyone who is engaged in deliberate activities, who is responsible for constructing arrangements, that further learning. This includes not only faculty, instructional assistants, College Life staff, and academic administrators, but also students themselves, who should becoming increasingly reflective about their education and adept at assessing their own learning during their undergraduate career.

Assessment as Essential for the Educator

Assessment is an inherent and valuable part of any intentional activity such as education; an essential aspect of the teaching role; and a genuine need for any alert and reflective educator. It is not merely a requirement of accrediting agencies, nor is it essentially an extraneous burden and distraction. Indeed, our assessment activities can provide a measure of the collective intentionality of our efforts. However, assessment is not an end-in-itself, nor does it determine the content of our curriculum. The primary goal of the assessment program at Gettysburg College is not accountability to others; it is the enlightenment of practitioners. It may also offer the chance to celebrate success.

Standards of Assessment

To usefully assess learning, we do not require assessment instruments that become operational definitions of our goals; we need no sophisticated validity studies; we do not always need to seek quantitative results. In short, we should not require or claim that our assessment studies meet our professional standards for high-powered scientific or social science research (though occasionally that will be possible). At Gettysburg, we will employ a more modest standard: our assessments are treated as providing *relevant indicators of performance*. Adopting this standard allows us to avoid the temptation of endless debate about the assessment instruments themselves, and to devote more time to assimilating the results. For example, as we attempt to assess the learning outcomes of our “diversity” requirement, we need not hold out for a standardized instrument of demonstrated high validity and reliability and yielding quantified and criterion-referenced results; instead, we may employ one or more sources of data that simply provide relevant indicators of student learning related to the goal of this requirement. (This is not to suggest that the instruments themselves, once adopted, will receive no scrutiny or be subject to no alteration; the opposite is true.) This humbler standard allows us incidentally to collect information

about *unintended* learning outcomes – information that is often missed or ignored in very tight measurements of specifically intended outcomes.

The Selection of the Means of Assessment

The person or group most closely responsible for defining the learning goal should choose the “relevant indicators of performance” for that goal. An entire catalogue of types of assessment devices and procedures has been developed across the country and is available to us. Individuals or groups may adopt a practice or employ an instrument developed elsewhere, or develop specially designed assessment tools. The creative products of students can provide valuable evidence of learning outcomes. In general, we prefer assessments that:

- Employ multiple relevant indicators of performance;
- Compare Gettysburg results with peers or other norms;
- Are longitudinal, providing some report of change over time; and
- Provide context, through collecting demographic information about those assessed or providing pre- and post-experience comparisons.

However, these are ideals of measurement that cannot and should not always be met. The inability to identify assessment instruments and processes that meet these preferences is not an excuse for failing to assess a learning goal. Reasonable and relevant indicators of performance must be identified – even though they are less informative and formal than the ideal.

Support for Assessment

Though assessment should never become a preoccupation, debilitating the very activities it should enhance, it does undeniably takes time, attention, cooperation, and resources. The trustees, President, and senior administrative officers fully embrace the need for assessment, support assessment activities, and work to provide the resources needed to carry out the activities – staff time, training, materials, funding, etc. Similarly, college policies and practices should reflect the centrality of learning and the role of systematic assessment in assuring our collective success as educators. The Office of Institutional Analysis will serve as a central repository for assessment reports, studies and other related efforts. The collective view of these documents is likely to reveal information of greater value than any of the individual assessments alone. Also, the best of these assessments may serve as resources for others.

THE COMMITTEE ON LEARNING ASSESSMENT

General responsibility for the oversight of the assessment of student learning at Gettysburg College is vested in the Committee on Learning Assessment (COLA). Reporting to the Provost, and through the Provost to the President, the Committee has responsibility for both the implementation and periodic review of this Assessment Plan, and for the coordination of the assessment activities that the Plan commissions. The following ten members comprise COLA:

- The Director for Institutional Analysis (now the Assessment Officer of the College);
- One faculty member selected by the Academic Policy and Programs Committee from its membership;
- Two faculty appointed by the Provost for their knowledge of assessment, teaching and learning, or curricular issues;
- Two faculty members elected at large;
- A representative of the Provost;
- A representative of the Vice President for College Life;
- A representative of the Vice President for Enrollment Services; and
- A student appointed by the Student Senate

The faculty members shall have staggered terms of three years. The student member shall serve for one year. The Committee shall meet at least twice each term. The responsibilities of the COLA include:

- (1) **monitoring and coordinating all learning assessment activities** in compliance with this Plan by reviewing the goals, means of assessment, and results for each level, while keeping thought for the quality and integrity of the assessment process;
- (2) **conducting the assessment of specific overarching general education learning goals** as described below;
- (3) **creating and supporting a “culture of assessment”** at the College, by establishing policies related to the publication of assessment results; fostering the sharing of practices and data; encouraging the use of assessment results in the reform of practice; supporting assessment training; and establishing and maintaining a website for assessment activities, policies, and results at Gettysburg College;
- (4) **reporting learning outcomes to the President** as the key component of the overall assessment of Gettysburg College’s institutional effectiveness; and
- (5) **regularly reviewing, emending, and implementing this Assessment Plan;** and monitoring the relationship of this institutional plan to the evolving standards for assessment of the Middle States Association.

SPHERES OF ASSESSMENT

Gettysburg College has identified four separate but interrelated levels or areas of learning outcome assessment. These are the assessment of student learning within:

- Individual academic courses offered by faculty;
- Majors (and minors) offered by academic departments and programs;
- The baccalaureate degree, especially general education, including the specific graduation requirements;
- Co-curricular programs.

Each of the levels constitutes a distinct focus of assessment activities. Each has unique processes and timetables, though they must be coordinated and integrated for maximum effectiveness. (Each level is discussed separately in this Plan below.)

LEARNING IN INDIVIDUAL COURSES

It is the responsibility of the instructor of each credit-bearing course to assess the learning of students in that course. This is accomplished, first, by developing specific learning goals for the course and publishing these in the course syllabus. The learning goals, which should derive from the mission of the College, should also reflect any particular educational goals of a major, minor, or general education requirement that the course fulfills. Second, the instructor should employ tests and other assignments that assess learning outcomes in relation to these goals. Third, the instructor should use the results of the assessment to modify the delivery of the course.

Gettysburg College requires the evaluation of every course and instructor, every term, by students. This evaluation can provide relevant assessment beyond student performance on required assignments. A common course evaluation form, supplemented by departmental and instructor-designed evaluations, provides potentially valuable feedback regarding student learning.

CURRICULAR PROGRAMS

Every department and program (and, hence, major and minor) at Gettysburg College is to be evaluated according to a prescribed procedure. In accordance with a seven-year cycle of reviews scheduled by the Office of the Provost, each department or program prepares a self-study. An appointed team of external reviewers reviews the self-study, visits the campus, and then produces an evaluative report. After studying this report, the department or program produces a written response. All of these documents are then shared with the Trustees' Committee on Academic Affairs as background to a joint meeting that focuses on challenges and opportunities of the department or program.

Direct administrative responsibility for external reviews rests with the Vice Provost. There are separate documents specifying the schedule of reviews, the contents and procedures of the self-study, and the process for selection of the external reviewers. The Provost's Office maintains a file of these documents and of the self-studies and reports; that office is responsible for the institutional follow-through on issues raised in these reports. This system of external reviews has been, in general, very useful in providing assessment of many aspects of program quality; it has occasionally had a dramatic impact on practice. However, it has not regularly included a focus on the basic and crucial element of program quality: student learning.

Henceforth, it shall be a responsibility of the department or program being reviewed to define and publish in its self-study its shared goals for student learning (*What specific*

learning outcomes are intended by this major or minor?); to identify relevant means of assessment – relevant indicators of performance – along with the timing of the assessment (*Senior capstone course? Post graduation surveys?*); and to begin conducting the assessment, reporting the results and their import.

Although most academic departments and programs are already engaged in significant assessment activity, and all are urged to begin this formal process as soon as possible, this Plan assures that within the seven-year cycle of reviews, all units will be in compliance. Assessment should occur at least annually, covering each graduating cohort, although results and formal review may occur only every seven years.

The documents of the review – self-study, reviewers’ report, response, and all related learning assessment data – shall be shared with COLA, as well as with the Provost and the Committee on Academic Affairs of the Board.

ASSESSMENT OF THE DEGREE: GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

The baccalaureate degree is given shape and quality by its structure – the major and minor, general education as expressed in graduation requirements and electives. These components, which derive their particular character from the Mission Statement of the College, are the means chosen to achieve overarching educational (learning) goals for students. It is the collective responsibility of the faculty to determine the requirements for any degree. It is a correlative responsibility to articulate the learning goal for each and every graduation requirement (including specific general education requirements, the completion of a major, the completion of a dossier, etc.). The Academic Policy and Programs Committee (APPC) – and not individual departments – is the custodian of these requirements as representatives of the faculty. The APPC may refine and interpret these intended learning goals, establishing criteria for the approval of courses or experiences that meet these requirements.

The APPC, in consultation with COLA, shall also select the means of assessment for each overarching educational goal. (These choices should be reported to the faculty.) COLA, with the assistance of the Office of Institutional Analysis, shall carry out the assessment and report the results to the APPC. As graduation requirements are adopted or modified, they are placed on a timetable for assessment. Each year, this assessment effort shall focus on two areas. Reviewing the actual learning outcomes related to these two requirements and considering resulting changes in the curriculum will be an important agenda item for both the APPC and COLA during that year. Assessment activities – especially the collection of learning outcomes data – will probably occur annually for each requirement, even though the formal review of the data and the requirement occurs only every few years.

(At this writing, the College has just approved a sweeping review of graduation requirements. During the implementation planning, each educational goal and graduation requirement – revised or original – will be placed on a schedule of reviews to be appended to

this Assessment Plan. For example, in a given year assessment might focus on the general education goal of “Local and Global Citizenship,” which would include assembling and reviewing data related to the Foreign Language and Diversity Requirements. Those requirements having the greatest continuity with the previous curriculum will be earlier on the schedule than those that are clearly new and different.)

CO-CURRICULAR PROGRAMS

Student learning is a high priority within the co-curricular program of Gettysburg College. The College prides itself on a purposeful learning environment for students both inside and outside the classroom. The co-curricular programs support the College’s mission to “prepare students to be active leaders and participants in a changing world.” We recognize that powerful learning often takes place outside the classroom, particularly in a small residential liberal arts college. Co-curricular administrators see themselves as partners with the faculty in creating educationally purposeful activities with and for students.

Student learning outside the classroom occurs through contact that students have with one another, through their interaction with particular programs, and broadly through the environments in which they operate. The residential and co-curricular environment is intentionally designed to promote student learning. In their engagement with particular programs, students have considerable discretion to select, organize, and reflect upon the co-curricular learning opportunities available to them. We encourage students to explore and advance their personal developmental needs and goals through involvement in various co-curricular programs.

Many of the co-curricular programs of the College are intended to reinforce the declared learning outcome goals of the baccalaureate curriculum (and indeed our new curriculum even provides for the opportunity of fulfilling some graduation requirements through co-curricular activities). Clearly, not all of the learning goals for students at Gettysburg College are accomplished through credit-bearing courses. Some of our shared educational goals for students are achieved *primarily* through our intentional program of residential life and co-curricular activities. Typically, such learning is not classroom-based and is not fostered by a didactic pedagogy; it is better achieved through reflective experience and participation, often collaboratively, in a program. These learning goals also derive from our Mission Statement; they typically focus on skills, attitudes, and values. These learning goals also derive from our Mission Statement; they typically focus on helping students apply knowledge and concepts in practical situations and on providing opportunities for the integration and application of knowledge. They represent important elements in the ideal of the Gettysburg graduate.

It is the responsibility of the Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Group (as defined in the “Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Program”), in consultation with the Student Life Council, to articulate the learning goals of our co-curricular program. It is important that these goals be presented to and embraced by COLA and the faculty at large, because they complement and complete our educational goals for our students. Moreover, just as the co-curriculum may reinforce our curricular goals, the reverse is true as well. It is also the

responsibility of this administrative team to select the means of assessment and to conduct the assessment.

In a parallel process to that described for graduation requirements, the Vice President for College Life shall establish a schedule in which one or more co-curricular learning goals are assessed each year – though data from each class may be collected annually for all goals. Wherever possible, we will look for opportunities to merge assessment of shared learning goals among the curricular and co-curricular programs.

PROJECTED ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES FOR 2003-2008

It is our plan to accomplish the following objectives regarding learning outcomes assessment within each level during each of the five years listed (the responsible agency for each is listed in brackets):

Committee on Learning Assessment (COLA)

2002-03

- Develop and seek endorsement of this Assessment Plan [Middle States Steering Committee (MS)]
- Review current learning assessment activities at all levels [MS]

2003-04

- Establish COLA and provide its orientation and training [Provost, Director of Institutional Analysis]
- Complete our self-study and reaccreditation review, focusing on improving our assessment Middle [MS]

2004-08

- COLA carries out the duties described above [COLA]

Assessing Learning in Individual Courses

2002-03

- Develop a standard course/instructor evaluation form to be administered along with traditional, complementary departmental and instructor-specific evaluation forms [Provost]
- Present workshop and conduct training on classroom assessment [Center for Creative Teaching (CCT); MS]

2003-04

- Implement the newly-adopted standard course/instructor form and monitor results, including their usefulness in pre-tenure, tenure, promotion, and triennial reviews [Provost; all faculty]
- Present additional training on classroom assessment [CCT]

2004-08

- Review course/instructor evaluation form's effectiveness [Provost, FDC, FPC, and department chairs]
- Present additional training on classroom assessment [CCT]

Assessment of Departments and Programs (Majors and Minors)**2002-03**

- Complete revised and expanded policy and schedule for departmental and program reviews [Vice Provost and Provost]
- Complete reviews of German, Education, and Management [Vice Provost and departments]

2003-04

- Begin formal articulation of learning goals in self-studies [Vice Provost]
- Complete reviews of scheduled departments/programs, including the full cycle: self-study, external reviewers' visit and report, written response, and trustee presentation, along with administrative follow-up. [Vice Provost and scheduled departments and programs]

2004-08

- Continue the schedule and cycle of reviews, which includes four to five departments or programs each year. [Vice Provost and scheduled departments and programs]

Assessment of the Baccalaureate Degree (General Education)**2002-03**

- Complete the faculty voting on general education requirements [Faculty]

2003-04

- Codify the overarching learning goals of the baccalaureate degree associated with each general education goal and graduation requirement [COLA and APPC]
- Establish a schedule for assessment of general education areas and graduation requirements [COLA]
- Identify the means of assessment for the "first half" of the graduation requirements [COLA]
- Assess one goal and its associated graduation requirements: e.g., *Local and Global Citizenship* as expressed in the Diversity and Foreign Language Requirements

2004-05

- Identify the means of assessment for the "second half" of the graduation requirements [COLA]
- Assess one general education goal and its associated graduation requirements. [COLA]

- 2005-08**

 - Identify the means of assessment for the “first half” of the graduation requirements [COLA]
- Continue to collect data annually related to all graduation requirements [COLA]
 - Continue to assess one goal and its associated graduation requirement each year [COLA]

Assessment of the Co-Curricular Program

- 2002-03**

 - Review current learning assessment activities [Vice President for College Life (VPCL) and Vice President for Enrollment Services (VPES)]
- 2003-04**

 - Codify the learning goals of the baccalaureate degree associated with our co-curricular programs [Designated team of administrators, SLC, VPCL and VPES]
 - Presentation of co-curricular learning goals to SLC and COLA [VPCL and VPES]
 - Present workshop and conduct training on co-curricular assessment [VPCL and VPES]
 - Identify the means of assessment for the co-curricular goals [Designated team of administrators, SLC, VPCL and VPES]
- 2004-05**

 - Assess one goal associated with co-curricular programs [Designated team of administrators, SLC, VPCL and VPES]
 - Collect data for all co-curricular learning goals [Designated team of administrators, SLC, VPCL and VPES]
- 2005-08**

 - Assess one goal associated with co-curricular programs each year [Designated team of administrators, SLC, VPCL and VPES]
 - Collect data for all co-curricular learning goals each year [Designated team of administrators, SLC, VPCL and VPES]

FINAL COMMENTS

Liberal arts colleges have generally been slow to embrace the shift in focus from teaching to learning, the development of a “climate of evidence” for educational goals and

marketing claims, and the implementation of systematic assessment of learning. Gettysburg College has long engaged in various forms of assessment that have often reformed and improved practice in each of the four levels described above. However, it is our intention through this plan to develop a more structured and self-conscious program of learning assessment in all its aspects – goal articulation, regular assessment with appropriate means, and use of results as feedback for our deliberate employment.