

# Gettysburg College

Report of the  
Subcommittee on  
Learning Outside the Classroom

June 15, 2003

Submitted by:

Julie Ramsey  
David Wright  
David Steinour  
Robin Wagner Pete Curry  
Thomas Mottola  
Margaret-Ann Radford-Wedemeyer  
Kathleen Williams

## Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Program

### Introduction

Student learning is a high priority within the co-curricular program of Gettysburg College. The College prides itself on having a powerful learning environment for students both inside and outside the classroom. The Co-curricular programs of the College seek to ... (quote from mission statement). We recognize that powerful learning often takes place outside the classroom, particularly in a small residential liberal arts college. We see ourselves as partners with the faculty in the educational process.

We recognize that while we share many learning goals with the academic program, we also have goals for students that may not be expressly articulated as part of the academic program of the college. Our approach to learning is often different from that of the faculty, as it focuses primarily on experiential learning and on the voluntary aspect of student participation.

We should note the presence of mixed institutional and professional messages about the primacy of *learning* in co-curricular programs. The profession often uses the dichotomous language of "student development" and "academic learning." There can be ambiguity in our profession around the centrality of learning: do students come to us to learn or to receive a "service." The intense competition for students in the last decade has yielded a more intense concentration on recruitment functions and student satisfaction. At the same time, student growth at Gettysburg has put additional strain on fairly fixed resources of personnel and funding. While these are not excuses, they may help us understand the challenges inherent in a student learning focus in co-curricular life.

Student participation in learning activities outside the classroom falls into some definable categories that are helpful in understanding the nature of the co-curricular learning process at Gettysburg College.

The first of these is referred to here as "Dedicated Participation in Co-curricular Activities." In these activities, students participate in an extended training and skill building program which most closely resembles a structured "curriculum." These learning programs, coordinated and led by a trained administrator, are designed to deepen conceptual understanding, develop skills, and provide opportunities for practice, feedback and reflection. Students in these types of learning opportunities are often trained to deliver services to other students and are evaluated in their ability to do so effectively. The training tends to be systematic, routine, and ongoing over a number of months. Gettysburg College has numerous opportunities of this kind for students, and the number of such

learning opportunities has been growing steadily for the past decade. Examples of this kind of learning opportunities in the co-curricular area would include: residence life staff, Orientation leaders, admissions tour guide program, intercollegiate athletics, Center for Public Service Program Coordinators, GRAB (Gettysburg Recreation Adventure Board) staff, Women's Center co-coordinators, and CHEERS, the College's peer counseling program.

Assessment methods for these structured learning opportunities include: pre and post testing, written and oral self assessment and group reflection, focus groups, surveys and advisor assessment. Methods used to evaluate the data collected include win/loss ratios, graduation rates, return rates, peer assessments, student interviews during departmental and program reviews, and reviews of programs on an annual basis. Frequently, changes to the programs are made as a result of student feedback. We do the highest degree of assessment in these programs in which both we and the students are most heavily involved.

A second type of definable co-curricular learning takes place in ways that are largely self-organizing on the part of students, with varying degrees of organization and input provided by administrative and faculty advisors. These programs tend to have little or no structured training as part of the program participation, but often involve significant "hands on," active learning for students. Through their participation in these activities, students seek learning opportunities that they perceive to support their academic success and personal growth. This kind of student initiated and self-organizing learning takes place when students participate in volunteer activities, join and lead clubs and organizations, organize groups for theme housing, participate in campus governance and college committees, and attend special events, such as speakers, concerts, departmental presentations, and Common Hour. Opportunities for learning of this kind have increased dramatically in the last decade, as the number of clubs, volunteer opportunities, residential options, and special events has risen.

The voluntary usage of college services is another form of "self organized" learning. We encourage students to present their needs for individualized attention to faculty and administrative staff. Examples include students who seek advice and counsel from the Academic Advising Office, the Counseling and Health Center or Career Counseling office, as well as students who seek technical advice from Information Technology or the Library.

Assessment of student learning in such situations tends to rely on self assessment and may also involve focus groups, advisor assessment, surveys, and pre and post testing. We do monitor participation levels, though we know that participation alone does not insure student learning. Participation levels do

convey the extent to which students find these activities worthwhile, challenging and engaging, so some learning can be inferred through participation levels.

A third category of co-curricular learning is achieved through involvement in programs required of all students. In this regard, students are exposed to certain cultural assumptions about learning simply by virtue of being enrolled at the college. All Gettysburg College students, for example, are required to participate in the residence program, are bound by the rules of the Student Code of Conduct and the Honor Code. These are not optional or voluntary learning activities; rather they are viewed as fundamental parts of the learning experience for all Gettysburg College students. It may be viewed as “passive,” but learning to live in an academic community and abide by the rules of such a community is an inherent part of the co-curricular learning experience at Gettysburg. Assessment of this dimension of co-curricular learning is no doubt the least well developed among the categories mentioned above, but does include surveys, self evaluations, exit interviews, and peer evaluations. To some extent, the learning in these areas is observable and therefore quantifiable.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of the Current Program**

One of the strengths of the current co-curricular program is the extent to which all departments are working to develop and enhance student learning beyond the classroom, based on the mission of the institution. All of the functional areas of College Life and Enrollment and Educational Services place a high priority on student learning. The overall learning goals are well understood and shared among administrative units. That said, it is clear that codified goals for co-curricular learning have not been established in any systematic way, particularly in ways that reach across the divisional boundaries between the College Life division and the EES division.

**Recommendation #1: Based on this observation, we recommend that the College Life division and the EES division collaborate in the creation of codified learning goals for co-curricular programs.**

We need to be more intentional about the creation of overarching, common language to describe our learning goals for students. We need clearer understanding of who our students are, what they bring to the process, and how to assess their progress. We need a multi-dimensional framework for understanding student learning outside the classroom. As a first step, we will focus on a few key learning goals, and seek to find ways of adapting existing mechanisms to provide additional information to help track student progress. One example of this would be to adapt the admissions essay to focus on one or more key learning goals.

During the self-study, we formed a cross-divisional committee to compile this report. This committee should be continued beyond the self study to become a standing committee with an ongoing responsibility. We also began the process of codifying learning goals in the summer of 2003 with a focused retreat with cross-divisional representation. The focus was on articulating and clarifying learning goals. A draft of that work will be available for broad-based discussion at the end of the summer 2003.

Another of the strengths of our current process for assessment is that responsibility for assessment is widely distributed and that many of the departments have some degree of learning assessment methodology in place. This decentralized approach has allowed individual departments to develop assessment tools that make most sense to them, and as a result, there seems to be a high degree of support for assessment as an ongoing process. The disadvantage of a highly decentralized process, however, is that larger assessment questions may not get asked, and data may not be as widely available to the entire co-curricular area as we would like. This has been the case, for example, with some large survey results—the data are compiled and available, but relatively few people are familiar enough with the data to make meaningful use of it.

**Recommendation #2: We also recommend that a Committee for Co-Curricular Learning be established to oversee the development of an assessment plan for this area. The Committee will be charged to review current practices, identify gaps and to develop a systematic plan for co-curricular assessment, including the compilation and dissemination of assessment data.**

Another observation with regard to co-curricular learning assessment is that there is some tendency in this area to confound assessment of student learning with program assessment or assessment of student satisfaction. While student satisfaction is not unrelated to student learning, particularly when participation in activities is optional for students, we must refine our assessment tools so that we can better distinguish the two. We also appear to be missing many opportunities to “capture” student learning because we are unaware of basic assessment practices. More frequent use of pre- and post-testing, for example, would allow us to better understand the actual learning that has occurred during student participation in our programs. We also need to better understand the use of “rubrics” to gauge the level of student learning and to track this over time.

We should become more focused on the macro assessment of student learning. If, for example, we suspect that students who engage in what we call “dedicated participation” in co-curricular programs, learn more, then it behooves us to know what percentage of our student body can be said to be “dedicated participants,”

to view them as a cohort group that can be compared to other groups, and to track them over time.

**Recommendation #3: We recommend that the college provide professional development opportunities for administrators to attend workshops and conferences on student learning assessment. We also recommend that a person within College Life and EES be designated as the “resident expert” on assessment and be trained accordingly. This individual would focus on disseminating best practices in co-curricular learning assessment.**

The College Life and EES divisions have, for the past several years, regularly conducted external reviews of its programs and functional areas. In the past decade, the following programs have had external reviews: athletics, chapel, Career Planning and Placement, Student Activities, Center for Public Service, and learning disabilities. These external reviews have been very helpful evaluating programs, importing new ideas, and in maintaining professional expertise and competency levels. We also rely on professional organizations to keep us apprised of new standards for professional competency and skills. The CAS standards are one useful benchmark for performance in the student affairs area.

**Recommendation #4: We recommend that these external reviews continue, with a stronger focus on learning outcomes and assessment. Our goal should be to have each program reviewed once every 7-10 years.**

We would also observe that while our current co-curricular learning goals have a high degree of correspondence with the academic learning goals, we must admit that there has not been any clear confirmation of this through the faculty governance process. There has been no clear connection with faculty goals for student learning. Historically, the lack of overarching curriculum goals made it difficult to draw a connection between the two. The most recent curriculum revision, approved by the faculty this spring, makes it far easier to draw the parallels between in-class and out-of-classroom learning. We are particularly drawn to the concept of the portfolio included in the new curriculum design. We need to find ways of integrating our work with students into the portfolio process, so that both students and faculty have a better way of reflecting upon the learning that takes place outside the classroom. We may find that by focusing on common ground with the faculty, that there are areas of shared concern that we can collaborate in addressing.

**Recommendation #5: We recommend that the Committee on Co-Curricular Learning prepare a report and presentation on co-curricular**

**learning goals and use of the portfolio that can be shared with the faculty for discussion and feedback.**