

Gettysburg College

Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Plan

Subcommittee on
Learning Outside the Classroom

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Introduction

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.

Co-Curricular Learning Goals

Over the past decade, Gettysburg College co-curricular programs have engaged in a variety of assessment practices to gauge both program effectiveness and student learning. This is, however, the first systematic and comprehensive plan that has been developed for the assessment of student learning outside the classroom. These programs are largely concentrated in the College Life Division and to a lesser degree, in the Enrollment and Educational Services Division. This plan represents the first collaborative effort between these two divisions to articulate common learning goals and to measure student learning outcomes.

While the co-curricular program shares many learning goals with the academic program, it also has goals for students that may not be expressly articulated as part of the academic program of the college. 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 emphasis on student learning is well understood and shared among administrative units. However, the College has not established clear codified goals for co-curricular learning in a systematic way across the divisional boundaries between the College Life division and the EES division.

This clear delineation and definition of learning goals is the first step in the development of a comprehensive co-curricular learning plan. We expect that this articulation of learning goals will be iterative and continually evolving as the program changes over time, as we become more sophisticated in our understanding of learning assessment, and as we apply the findings of our assessment. We plan to focus our first iteration of co-curricular learning goals on four primary, over-arching learning goals for the entire co-curricular program. We also recognize that each administrative department will have specific learning outcomes unique to their area which they hope to achieve through their individual interactions with students.

One 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.

Another observation concerning co-curricular learning assessment is that there is some tendency in this area to confound assessment of student learning with assessment of programs, student needs, and student satisfaction. The majority of learning assessment literature focuses, on academic programs and formalized teaching and learning; the methodology for learning

assessment outside the classroom is far less systematic in our profession. In the last decade, the intense competition for students among colleges like Gettysburg has created a more intense concentration on recruitment and retention functions and student satisfaction. In the co-curricular arena, there can be real tension between student learning and student satisfaction. At the same time, student growth at Gettysburg has put additional strain on fixed resources of personnel and funding. This background may help us understand the challenges inherent in maintaining a rigorous focus on student learning in co-curricular programs. While assessment of co-curricular programs and student satisfaction may be important on many levels, we must refine our assessment tools so that we can better focus on student learning.

We also appear to be missing many opportunities to “capture” student learning because we have failed to apply 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. It is not always necessary to create new mechanisms for assessment; instead, we may need to enhance current features of our program in the task of assessment.

Levels of Co-Curricular Assessment

Student participation in learning activities outside the classroom falls into two definable categories that are helpful in understanding the nature of the co-curricular learning process at Gettysburg College. The foci for co-curricular assessment are:

- Structured programs and interactions designed by administrative offices, often working closely with students in the design and implementation of the activities.
- The residential and social environment, mostly directly shaped by the quality of student-student, student-faculty and student-administrator interactions.

Learning in Structured Programs

Gettysburg College has numerous opportunities of structured, focused learning opportunities beyond the classroom for students, and the number and variety of such learning opportunities has been growing steadily for the past decade. The structured learning experiences designed for students by administrators range in depth, duration and intensity. These include:

- Lectures, presentations and discussions on topics of importance to co-curricular life.
- Advisory and training sessions on problem areas presented by individual students or organizations.
- Peer educator programs in which students are trained to participate in the co-curricular learning process of other students.
- Recognized clubs, organizations, athletic teams and work groups that work directly and routinely with advisors, coaches and supervisors.
- Internships and work study with administrative offices.
- Study abroad and service learning trips.
- First year orientation and the FYE program.

It is the responsibility of the administrator in charge of each activity to expressly articulate the particular learning goals associated with that activity and to design the assessment methodology most suited to that activity. In each case, the learning goals must reference one or more of the overarching co-curricular learning goals articulated by the Co-Curricular Learning Group. Administrators are also responsible for re-designing activities based on the feedback provided through the assessment. As a feature of the Co-Curricular Learning Plan, all co-curricular administrators will be required to share the learning that derives from their assessment with the Co-Curricular Learning Group. The Group will share best practices and “lessons learned” with the entire College Life and EES divisions on an annual basis.

As much as possible, co-curricular learning assessment should include multiple methods of assessment. These methods will include pre and post testing, written and oral self-assessment and group reflection, focus groups, program evaluations and questionnaires, surveys, portfolios, and advisor assessment.

Residential and Social Environmental Learning

A second area of measurable co-curricular learning is achieved through students' involvement in the social and residential life of the college. In this regard, students are exposed to certain opportunities for learning simply by virtue of living together, designing their own social interactions, interacting regularly with faculty and administrators outside the classroom, and being governed by a standard code for student conduct and academic integrity. These interactions and relationships are viewed as a fundamental component of the learning experience for all Gettysburg College students. In all of these interactions, there is an "implicit curriculum" in which learning goals are embedded, although not always clearly articulated and measured. The residential and social environment has an intentional design and specific features inherent in it, including:

- An admissions and financial aid program specifically designed to bring together a talented, engaged and energetic cohort of students with various abilities, interests, and racial, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.
- A four-year residency requirement.
- A range of housing options, designed to provide increasing levels of independence and self-governance as students mature.
- A student code of conduct and an academic honor code.
- Institutional funding and support for self-governing organizations and clubs.
- Support for co-curricular programs and facilities

The residential and social life programs of the college are designed to facilitate and encourage widespread and significant "hands on," active learning for students. Through their participation in the social and residential life, students are encouraged to discover learning opportunities to enhance their personal growth. This kind of student-initiated, self-organizing learning is embedded in the nature of the residential liberal arts college, and are best realized when students participate in volunteer activities, join and lead clubs and organizations, organize groups for theme housing, administer the Honor Code and student code of conduct, plan social events, interact with individuals very different from themselves, and participate in campus governance and college committees. Opportunities for learning of this kind have increased dramatically in the last decade, as the diversity of the student body, the number of clubs, volunteer opportunities, residential options, and special events have increased.

Under the Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Plan, responsibility for assessment of the residential and social learning environment goals and outcomes will rest with the Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Group, in consultation with the Student Life Committee and COLA. The assessments will be conducted with support from key administrators with direct responsibility for particular areas and the Office of Institutional Analysis.

The Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Group

During the self-study, we formed a cross-divisional committee, the Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Group, to compile this report. This committee will be continued beyond the self-study to become the coordinating body of Co-Curricular assessment. The Committee is composed of the following individuals:

- The Vice President for College Life and Dean of Students (chair)
- The Vice President for Enrollment and Educational Services

- Two Associate Deans in College Life
- Two representatives from Athletics, including the Director of Athletics
- A representative from the Admissions Office
- A faculty member, to be appointed.
- The Director of Institutional Analysis

Additional members shall be added and rotated on an as-needed basis. The ongoing membership of the committee will be managed to retain continuity of membership, balanced with the need for periodic infusion of new energy and ability.

The Committee shall have the following responsibilities:

- The creation and ongoing modification of codified learning goals for co-curricular programs.
- The ongoing development and maintenance of a co-curricular learning assessment plan, including the review of current practices, identification of gaps, selection of appropriate methodologies and the compilation and dissemination of assessment data.
- The identification of assessment training needs and the coordination of periodic trainings for administrators on learning assessment. The Committee will advocate providing professional development opportunities for administrators to attend workshops and conferences on student learning assessment.
- The representation of co-curricular learning goals to COLA and the faculty at large.
- The development and collaboration with the faculty, of the use of the portfolio as an assessment methodology.

The group began the process of codifying learning goals in the summer of 2003 with a focused retreat with cross-divisional representation. A draft of that work will be available for broad-based discussion by mid-November 2003. The group also reviewed and approved this plan as the starting point for the future assessment for co-curricular learning. The group will designate one overarching learning goals to be assessed in each of the next four years.

Responsibilities of Department Heads and Division Heads

The responsibility for individual program assessment, selection of methodology, and incorporation of feedback into program planning will continue to reside with the administrators who have most direct responsibility for the program. This capacity for individual learning assessment within program areas is a significant area for routine discussion between department heads and divisional leaders and is one principle aspect of department head evaluations. Individual administrators must remain apprised of new standards for professional competency and skills. The Book of Professional Standards for Higher Education, published by Council for the Advancement of Standards, is a useful benchmark for performance in the student affairs area.

In addition to the routine, annual program reviews, the College Life and EES divisions will conduct external program reviews on a periodic basis. Both divisions have, for the past several years, regularly conducted external reviews of 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. In the past, these reviews have focused largely on the operational aspects of administrative programs. Under the new plan, these external reviews will also assess the capacity of the administrative unit to effectively establish and assess the learning goals for that area. The plan will call for a thorough self-study and external review once every 7-10 years. Results of the external reviews will be shared with the Co-Curricular Learning Assessment Group.