

# ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING: A PROGRESS REPORT FOR ELARC

Learning is a complex, holistic, multi-centric activity that occurs throughout and across the college experience. True liberal education requires the engagement of the whole student – and the deployment of every resource in higher education. (*Learning Reconsidered, 2004*)



## *Introduction*

Liberal learning has always focused on the holistic development of the student. Learning occurs across multiple dimensions of students' lives and can be enhanced through intentional opportunities for students to integrate and make meaning of their experiences. While cognition is one dimension of learning, Student Affairs seeks to engage and assess multiple forms of student learning.

Given this emphasis, our report does not use the essential learning outcomes (ELOs) as a starting point for all assessment efforts. Instead, we began with the goal of gaining deeper understanding of holistic learning as it manifests itself for UW-Whitewater students. Our initial efforts were intentionally exploratory in nature, while simultaneously attending to LEAP-related learning outcomes. This report describes our processes, the broad themes and ELO-related connections that emerged, implications for refinement of practice, and direction for ongoing assessment efforts.

## *Student Affairs Assessment Process*

The Student Affairs Division is comprised of nine departments (with more than 200 staff) that contribute significantly to the learning mission of our institution. Departments include: University Bookstore, Career and Leadership Development, the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD), the Children's Center, the Dean of Students Office, Recreation Sports and Facilities, the Department of Residence Life, the University Center (UC), and University Health & Counseling Services (UHCS).

To frame assessment efforts, we asked the following questions:

1. What did you chose to measure? Why was the activity selected?
2. How did you chose to measure the selected activity and why?
3. What did you learn from measurement and how is it being applied to current and future efforts?
4. How has this learning informed your understanding of the UW-Whitewater student experience?

## *Methodologies*

Seven departments used survey method of assessment. Of these seven, one department complemented survey work with focus groups, another department added outreach to students' parents, and a third department included one-on-one dialogue with students. Two departments focused solely on tracking student use of services. While no ELO template was imposed on departments (although two departments chose to use the ELO framework), four themes related to liberal learning emerged. We also uncovered unique influences and environmental contexts that impacted UW-Whitewater student learning.

## *Assessment Findings: Holistic Student Development*

The following emerged as significant ELO-related themes: (1) Critical

Thinking, Ethical Reasoning and Action, (2) Social Learning, (3) Oral Communication, and (4) Intercultural Knowledge and Competence.

It is important to note that definitions related to assessment categories varied across departments. For example, while the terms "critical thinking" or "decision making" were used by Career and Leadership Development, Dean of Students Office, Recreation Sports and Facilities, the UC, and UHCS, meanings of these terms varied within departmental context.

## *Critical Thinking, Ethical Reasoning and Action*

Five departments reported assessment efforts related to critical thinking and ethical reasoning and action. Several departments used the term "decision making" in ways that were synonymous with "ethical reasoning." At its core, assessment data spoke of students' practical skills as they related to emotional health, leadership, employment, and personal decision making.

In UHCS, counseling clients were invited to complete the Learning Outcomes and Satisfaction Survey. Of 103 students who completed this survey, 82% agreed with the statement, "I have increased my ability to think clearly and critically about my problems," and 65% agreed with the statement, "I have learned how to engage in an effective decision-making process."

In the Dean of Students Office, one assessment goal was to measure the impact staff interventions had with students in non-academic misconduct meetings. Students were asked to complete a one-page assessment form after they had met with a staff member regarding an alleged conduct violation. Among the ten outcome statements rated and commented on, 86% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "I am aware of how my behavior affects other people and the university community." Furthermore, 97% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "My experience with the conduct process will influence my future behavior choices as a student."

Critical thinking, ethical reasoning and action, and personal decision-making appeared in assessment results of three additional units. In Recreation Sports and Facilities, 167 student employees completed a learning outcomes survey that included "practical competence with decision making, time management, and organizational skills." Of survey respondents, 92% agreed or strongly agreed that department employment had assisted them in meeting these learning outcomes. In Career and Leadership Development, "decision-making skills" were assessed with 90 first-year student participants in the U-LEAD program, and with 13 student employees who were part of the SEAL Leadership Team. U-Lead students viewed decision-making skills as important in both effective leadership and life management. SEAL Leadership Team students self-reported that the employment experience

led to "improved personal decision-making skills."

The UC involved 100 student employees in ongoing focus groups and self-reflective narrative on the LEAP framework and ELOs. Regarding "personal and social responsibility," the data suggests that student employees were exposed to a broad range of opportunities to develop competencies related to critical and creative thinking, ethical reasoning, and personal decision making. UC student employees described decision making that was informed by their identities and values. One student said, "We are accountable for our actions because it reflects our character."

While overall assessment data spoke to a wide range of practical skills related to critical thinking and ethical reasoning and action, what also emerged was the interplay between student growth and identity development. In this context, the dimension of "personal decision making" should be a consideration in ongoing assessment work and program planning.

## *Social Learning*

The Department of Residence Life surveyed 2,834 hall residents through the annual ACUHO-I EBI satisfaction survey. This instrument assessed 15 factors related to satisfaction with the residence hall living experience. Factor 13, satisfaction with "personal interactions," was defined as satisfaction with the ability to meet others, improve relationships, live cooperatively, and resolve conflict. In comparison to UW-Whitewater's six EBI benchmark universities, satisfaction with the "personal interactions" factor was significantly higher. In fact, UW-Whitewater ranked #1 in this category. Moreover, UW-Whitewater ranked 14th in a national comparison of the approximately 300 universities who participated in the survey. While this finding does not reflect direct ELO assessment, it appears that the "personal interaction" EBI factor may be related to "oral communication," "teamwork and problem solving," and personal "ethical reasoning and action." The EBI findings point to a uniqueness of UW-Whitewater that should be explored further through assessment and programmatic response.

The importance that students assign to interaction was reflected by assessment efforts of three other units. In Career and Leadership Development's U-Lead Program, assessment focused on a range of leadership competencies, yet the highest rated U-lead experience was the "opportunity to meet new people and build relationships." Similarly, student employees in the UC and Recreation Sports and Facilities discussed forms of job related learning that occurred through interaction with peers, faculty, staff and community members. Common in the assessment efforts of all three units was the student use of the term "social skills." A first-year U-Lead student described an aspect of social skill learning as, "The rules of mingling . . . I didn't know there were rules."

Our data suggest that personal interactions play a significant role in students' lives. It is an area where they experience a high degree of satisfaction, particularly with peer relationships. As follow-up to these findings, the Department of Residence Life will continue to focus the work of the Resident Assistants on facilitating peer interaction. Career and Leadership Development has shifted its programmatic efforts, particularly in relation to diversity, to a greater emphasis on student interaction. We wish to explore further how peer culture may be leveraged to support liberal learning outcomes. Promoting self-agency and personal responsibility for one's learning could be powerfully reinforced through peer interaction.

### *Oral Communication*

Oral communication skills emerged as a competency that was assessed by UHCS, Career and Leadership Development, Recreation Sports and Facilities, the UC, and the CSD.

Of respondents in the UHCS survey, 71% agreed that as a result of their work in counseling, "I have improved my communication skills." A student employee in Recreation Sports and Facilities said, "I learned to talk to total strangers on the job." Career and Leadership Development's SEAL student employees reported that they were "better able to express themselves orally" and "improved their non-verbal communication skills." The UC's ELO assessment project included attention to oral communication skills. Roberta's Art Gallery, housed in the UC, was identified as a site where student employees learned public speaking competencies. Students employed across UC functions reported learning to "communicate professionally and efficiently, managing tasks and working as a team." The CSD's LEAP-based assessment efforts aimed at discovering ways the Principles of Excellence and ELOs could be infused most effectively into select department initiatives. As a result, the CSD Summer Transition Program course, "Transitioning to College," was revised with special attention to personal responsibility, problem-solving and communication skills.

A holistic perspective on the student experience emerged from comparison of data across departments. It suggests that students are developing and applying oral communication skills in employment, academic experiences, and in personal interactions with peers, intimate relationships, and families. The notion of an interpersonal, holistic context for oral communication was reflected by U-LEAD and SEAL data on non-verbal and active listening skills.

Though communication skills were not the direct focus of Residence Life EBI assessment, the significance of the factor "satisfaction with interpersonal interaction" was a finding worth further exploration. The EBI data implied that at the level of peer relationships, UW-W students may demonstrate stronger oral communication skills than students at benchmark universities. While student self-assessment perspectives of effective communication may vary from institutional definitions, a number of important questions emerge. In the UW-Whitewater student "interpersonal interaction" context, how are oral communication skills learned? Who and what experiences prompts this skill development? How can this experience be more connected to the efforts in academic, campus employment, and other liberal learning contexts?

### *Intercultural Knowledge and Competence*

Relationships change lives. Not surprisingly, the experience of student employees and student leaders reflect the power of diversity learning that comes through human interaction.

From the previously mentioned Residence Life ACUHO-I EBI survey, 117 Resident Assistants ranked their highest satisfaction factor (of 18 "factor" choices) as "diverse interactions" — defined on the survey as "interacting with people different than you," interacting with "diverse populations," and "valuing and respecting differences." In the area of RA "diverse interactions" satisfaction, UW-Whitewater ranked #1 in comparison to its 6 benchmark universities. The difference was statistically significant.

A similar theme emerged in the student employment assessment work of Recreation Sports and Facilities and the UC. In both departments, students discussed the significance of diverse interactions. One student reflected, "Recreation Sports has allowed me to interact with a diverse population and to be a part of a unique team of individuals." Students also reported ways that classroom learning informed diverse interactions. UC focus groups indicated that learning about different cultures in their general education classes helped them to feel more comfortable interacting across diverse groups. UC students discussed the employment context as one that gave them opportunities to develop relationships across diverse peoples.

Career and Leadership Development assessed diversity competencies in its U-Lead program and SEAL Leadership Team. These competencies were both relational and cognitive. In these programs, "enhancing knowledge including . . . culture and identity" was a learning goal. Self-assessment by SEAL participants indicated that they were better "able to define diversity" than previous to these experiences.

The cross-cultural interactions of international students were also examined by a graduate student research project supported by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs.

This study focused on the cross-cultural interactions of international students on our campus. Specifically, the study addressed the ways in which international students interacted with cultures different than their own; their expectations of cultural interactions prior to college; and how college cross-cultural interactions impacted them as students.

Study findings demonstrated that many international students had preconceived expectations for their American college experience. These expectations either positively or negatively influenced their cross-cultural interactions; they foreshadowed students' "willingness and ability to interact with domestic students and community members at large." For many international students, formal classroom educational was the propelling factor for coming to our country. Their cross-cultural interactions were seen often as an uncalculated yet beneficial byproduct of studying in America.

The majority of international students on our campus had travelled outside of their home country more than twice before attending UW-Whitewater. Yet, less than 40% claimed to have a strong knowledge of the U.S. prior to arrival on our campus. While international students

interacted with American students, most often their closest friends and acquaintances were not American students. They were either students from their home country, or other international students. These findings give us pause in thinking about how best we, as an institution, can help these students gain a full measure of cultural immersions through interactional diversity.

As Student Affairs moves beyond broad notions of inclusion to actual engagement, interactional diversity — meeting, interacting, and befriending individuals across identities different from one's own — becomes a cornerstone of our diversity learning efforts. Toward this end, Career and Leadership Development's renaming of the Involvement Center to the "Connection Center" is a symbolic change toward interactional diversity. Moreover, two new staff members have been hired to support ongoing diversity efforts related to group interaction, and the development of cognition and personal identity.

The Department of Residence Life plans to continue its diversity education, with particular attention to the role of peer interaction. Given the UC's employment findings, a deeper assessment of competencies related to intercultural learning is planned.

### *Contexts for Liberal Learning*

In Barr and Tagg's seminal article, *From Teaching to Learning - a New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education*, they describe a subtle shift from "colleges existing to provide instruction," to "colleges existing to produce learning." At the core of their learning paradigm is environmental management: If learning occurs, then the environment has power. Learning occurs within the context of students' lives and in the context of our learning environments. The following contexts were discovered in Student Affairs assessment efforts.

#### **Family Relationships**

The influence of students' family relationships on their learning emerged from assessment efforts of the CSD, the Children's Center, and Department of Residence Life.

Parents and families of first-year students with disabilities play a vital role in supporting students' transition from high school to college. In the k-12 educational system, students with disabilities have much done for them. In college, these students are required to be self-advocates, seeking out services and support. Parents and families need greater awareness and understanding of the value of a "diploma" from UW-Whitewater, clarification of student/parent/family roles and expectations, and the services provided by the CSD.

To obtain parent and family input on areas that should be covered in a CSD orientation, a telephone survey and follow up e-mail were conducted. Surveys were returned from 12 parents of freshmen and sophomore students who were currently using CSD services. As result of feedback, a special fall 2012 orientation session was offered for incoming freshmen who were eligible for CSD services. Parents and families were included in the orientation as well. The program focused on increasing participants' understanding of the Essential Learning Outcomes and the Principles of Excellence. The session also allowed CSD staff to discuss how LEAP influences expectations of new students and ways LEAP can shape the overall UW-W experience.

In the Children's Center, of 106 children of student, faculty, staff and community families served, 46 were from student families. Families indicated the need for support in effective parenting strategies. Through a partnership with the Counselor Education Program, two graduate students served as facilitators of a new Family Support Group, launched in Spring, 2012. One student parent remarked, "There is no doubt that I am a better parent now because of this group." Further, the Children's Center engaged in nine unique partnerships with academic units to further Center efforts and create learning opportunities for students.

The Department of Residence Life's MapWorks assessment tool indicated that in fall 2011, first-year students of color and international students experienced a higher degree of "distressed homesickness" than white students. "Distressed Homesickness" is a metric identified by MapWorks as a persistence risk factor. Because MapWorks allows students to self-identify their desire for follow-up support, the Residence Life staff were able to do so.

In summary, Student Affairs assessment data reflected the family context as a significant consideration. MapWorks provides a perspective on the impact of family relationships on persistence of international and students-of-color. The work of the CSD and the Children's Center suggest potential to leverage commitment of the entire family towards student liberal learning outcomes.

#### **Staff Roles in Integration and Meaning Making**

While the degree of direct assessment varied in Student Affairs approaches, staff relationships with students appeared as a meaningful context. Specifically, staff played a role in helping students to integrate learning in their lives.

For example, the UC's assessment process included ongoing focus groups for students to discuss and reflect on each ELO. A staff member commented on this process:

By having these regular, intentional conversations with students, they reflect more deeply and are willing to share their thoughts. It gives staff an opportunity to listen, learn, and provide students with feedback. And, students can think more deeply about the merits of the ELO and how it applies to aspects of their lives, classes, work (UC employment) and careers.

In the Dean of Student's Office, one assessment criterion was the "level of respect students feel they were afforded by staff." A staff member shared this related comment:

One of the strongest benefits of this (assessment) approach is that it constantly reminds us of the important tenets of our relationship with students when we meet with them. For example, it reminds us that treating students with respect and truly listening to them will yield the greatest success.

Upon review of department assessment data, UHCS counselors noted the significant role they play in prompting student reflection, meaning-making and integration. One staff member suggested that student clients be given the opportunity to reflect on their counseling

experience within the LEAP framework to "examine skills gained and ways those skills could be helpful in the client's daily life."

Intentional interactions with students may have additional impact related to self-agency and personal identity. Data from three departments reflected students shifting to greater independence, efficacy and decision making, while also exploring personal identity and beliefs. This was reported often in the context of contact with division staff.

In UHCS, 81% of students who responded to their survey agreed with the statement that through a counseling relationship, "I have gained a greater understanding of myself or a clearer sense of my identity." Assessment efforts of Career and Leadership Development and Recreation Sports and Facilities suggest that staff prompted similar self-reflection and learning.

The role of staff in helping students to make meaning of their learning and to integrate it into their lives and identities appeared as an important theme. Six Student Affairs units outlined action plans for continuing staff interactions as central to students' meaning making and integration of their university experiences.

#### **Student Employment in Student Affairs: A High Impact Practice?**

During 2011-2012, there were 1,466 undergraduates and 21 graduate students employed in the Division of Student Affairs. The range of employment types included office administrative jobs, direct service positions, supervisory jobs, large-scale event management roles, and peer mentors in individual, group, or community-based contexts.

Recreation Sports and Facilities, the UC, the Department of Residence Life, Career Services and Leadership, and the Children's Center conducted assessment work on the student employment experience. Data suggest that many of these positions provided opportunities for students to build skills and integrate their learning as it relates to leadership, personal development, diversity, college major, and career interests. Connections between college major and employment were tracked by Children's Center assessment data. The Center employed 72 undergraduates as teaching assistants. Of these students, 43 were early childhood or elementary education majors.

Students employed on campus at UW-Whitewater for at least one year during the years of 2002 through 2006 had greater persistence rates than their counterparts without campus employment (75.1% versus 50.9%). Additional years of student employment beyond one year were associated with higher graduation rates. In fact, students with four years of on campus employment earned baccalaureate degrees at a startling 94.4 % rate.

A more detailed examination of student employment in both the learning outcome and program completion contexts is indicated. This includes examining campus employment as a high impact practice and expanding use of ELO-based assessment.

#### **Impact of Technology**

In the University Bookstore, tracking national, regional and UW-Whitewater trends in student technology use was an assessment

priority. This department's report detailed the reality that social media, ebooks, iPads and mobile apps continue to influence students' lives.

According to the ComScore 2010 Digital report, there was a 59% drop in use of web-based email by 12- to 17-year-olds as social networks and mobile channels replace email. The report also found that 15.4% of college freshmen owned an e-reader or tablet, while 5.7% planned to purchase one in the near future.

For students under the age of 21 years, 51% had a smartphone, with more than half (52.4%) of freshmen using one as their primary phone. Access codes and clickers were increasingly common in the UW-Whitewater classroom. Sales in the University Bookstore included 531 clickers and 28 access codes in 2011-12.

The University Bookstore also identified a trend related to the student expectation of immediacy and value. When reflecting on this trend, a staff member said:

What we learned is that students are willing to purchase their textbooks at the University Bookstore because of the ease of charging costs to their student bill. They are willing pay for commodities they perceive to have value in their lives.

Data provided by the University Bookstore provides a thought-provoking context for liberal learning. What ways does technology and the need for immediacy and value influence our campus LEAP efforts? How do these findings impact our student interactions and the development of curricular/co-curricular programs?

#### **Student Wellness, Health, and Alcohol Use**

Career and Leadership Development, Chartwells (reports to the UC), Dean of Students Office, Recreation Sports and Facilities, Residence Life, and UHCS engage in student health and wellness programming. The health and wellness context includes alcohol and other drug education. Two units provided assessment data on student alcohol use and knowledge.

In the UHCS Healthy Minds Study, 778 randomly selected students participated. UW-Whitewater students were significantly more likely to engage in binge drinking in the two weeks prior to completing the survey (47.5%) than students from the study's national sample (44%). Self-reported UW-Whitewater binge drinking was not significantly different from the universities in the study's Wisconsin sample. One UW-Whitewater participant said: "My biggest regret in college is the excessive amounts of drinking I do on the weekends."

In another effort to understand students' experience with alcohol, the Dean of Students Office implements a pre- and post-test survey to students involved in alcohol violations. For alcohol violations, students are required to complete an online Alcohol Education Class.

The pre- and post-test survey examines the online course impact on students' knowledge of alcohol and its effects. Over the course of the 2011-'12 academic year, the average pre-test score on knowledge of alcohol's deleterious effect was 59%; the post-test average score was 84%.

A Dean of Student's staff member said of these findings:

It has taught us that, in general, our student population is not well educated about alcohol and the effects its use has on them. We have also learned that the on-line course holds promising results related to furthering their knowledge. Additional assessment needs to be done to see if this intervention impacts behavior.

Student alcohol use continues to be an important area for ongoing assessment and programmatic attention. Currently, efforts of Student Affairs departments provide a wide array of programs and activities related to student health, wellness, and alcohol and other drug education. Opportunities for healthy weekend social alternatives are also provided.

Many of our alcohol and wellness initiatives involve student peers. This report points strongly to the influence of UW-Whitewater peer culture in students' lives. We wonder about the additional ways this culture may be leveraged in pursuit of student health, wellness and alcohol education. More broadly, what are ways that we may best align our collaborative alcohol and wellness efforts with the aims of academic success and holistic liberal learning? In this context, what are implications for student, faculty, staff, and community working relationships?

#### *Conclusion*

Student Affairs assessment efforts have focused on learning more about UW-Whitewater students, the totality of their university experience, and how learning occurs. Applying the science of learning to learning (metacognition), we seek to discover how aspects of what makes us human (e.g., the cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical) influence learning.

We will continue a research and assessment agenda that is exploratory in nature, while simultaneously attending to LEAP-related learning outcomes. At present, our collective approach to assessment is asking the "deep" questions of learning — both of student learning and that of our own. Ultimately, our vision for assessment is that it will powerfully aid us in realizing the promise that holistic, liberal learning holds for UW-Whitewater students, faculty and staff. We believe this reflects the tradition of liberal learning's history and promise.

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