

Committee on Assessment, 2009-2010 Year-End Report and Recommendations

Committee on Assessment Mission

According to the Governance, the Assessment Committee

...shall examine and evaluate the practices in place to achieve the College's educational goals as stated in its mission statement and elsewhere. Each year it shall investigate topics that bear on the achievement of the college's stated goals and also address over a ten-year period all of the "Standards for Accreditation" published by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The results of this investigation shall be presented to the faculty at the end of each academic year and shall contribute to the material presented to the Middle States accreditation committee every ten years. The committee shall also make suggestions to the appropriate bodies about ways to bring the college's practices and its goals into closer alignment...The topics for investigation in the following year shall be chosen by the committee before the election of the following year's committee

2009-2010 Assessment Committee Tasks

The outgoing 2008-2009 Assessment Committee assigned two tasks to the incoming 2009-2010 Assessment Committee:

1. to continue the outgoing Assessment Committee's work on student writing beyond the freshman seminar, and
2. to recommend an approach by which the College can assess Middle States Fourteen Standards of Excellence in its ten-year cycle between reviews.

In November, the Middle States review team's letter and recommendations highlighted the pressing need to attend specifically to two of the fourteen standards.

Standard 4, Leadership and Governance, requires that the **"institution's system of governance clearly defines the roles of institutional constituencies in policy development and decision-making. The governance structure includes an active governing body with sufficient autonomy to assure institutional integrity and to fulfill its responsibilities of policy and resource development, consistent with the mission of the institution."**

Standard 14 requires **"Implementation of a comprehensive, organized and sustained process to assess student achievement of institutional, program, and course-level learning outcomes and evidence that student learning and assessment information is used to improve teaching and learning."** The 2009-2010 Assessment Committee took on this area of assessment as a third task, and identified the following components:

3. a) to make explicit the ways in which student achievement of institutional, program, and course-level learning outcomes already are being assessed
- b) to make explicit the ways in which assessments of student achievement already are being used to improve teaching and learning
- c) to identify additional ways in which student learning outcomes can be assessed directly and systematically
- d) to evaluate the relationship of these outcomes to particular aspects of our teaching, particularly at an institutional level
- e) to suggest systems by which the College can track and make optimal use of its external and self-assessments.

2009-2010 Assessment Committee Progress Report and Recommendations

As the 2009-2010 Assessment Committee continued work begun by previous Assessment Committees (especially Task 1, continuation of the assessment of student writing), we realized that the Committee would benefit from more year-to-year continuity in its membership.

- **Recommendation 1: We recommend that the Assessment Committee terms be extended beyond one year to two or three years and be staggered to ensure at least one member's continuation from year to year.**

Task 1: Writing beyond the freshman seminar

Our approach to the assessment of student writing began with the review of information from several sources, including the 2008-2009 Assessment Committee notes, student comments from previous Senior Assessment Luncheons, and the Teagle study of writing in which Vassar participated. As we read and discussed student writing, this year's Assessment Committee formulated questions aimed to understand better the development of student writers and to improve our institution's capacity for excellence in student writing.

- How do students develop as writers? Where do their trajectories show continuous improvement and/or growth spurts? Do some writing trajectories ever show a temporary decline in quality (perhaps with increased complexity of thought) and then, improve?
- How do student writing samples from the first year compare with students' pre-college writing?
- How do students think about writing and about themselves as writers, and how do their perceptions evolve over the course of their college careers? Other research suggests that, with the development of writing skills, students' views of writing and of themselves as writers also evolve.
- Which aspects of the curriculum show the strongest associations with subsequent improvement in student writing? Do specific types of courses and assignments

seem particularly effective? How can we use this information to improve our course offerings and teaching?

- Is writing development, in part, the result of a “good match” of students to their curricular offerings? For example, do science students respond better to some types of writing instruction than to others, and is there a different pattern for foreign language majors? Do first-generation college students find some writing experiences more conducive than others to their learning?
- What is the role of the Writing Center? What kinds of writing help do students typically seek, and which approaches to student needs may yield the best outcomes?
- What kinds of writing do our recent alumnae/alumni practice most often in their fields of work? In retrospect, where do they remember developing the writing skills they now use regularly?

In reviewing past studies of student writing at Vassar, we realized that their cross-sectional approach left these specific questions unanswered, and so, explored the feasibility of an intensive, longitudinal study of writing instruction and outcomes at Vassar. Over the course of the first semester of 2009-2010, we examined various longitudinal writing studies from other institutions and outlined a longitudinal writing study for Vassar. We wrote an application to the Institutional Review Board for preliminary collection of writing samples, set up a Moodle site for the collection of writing samples, received approval from the IRB, and contacted a random sample of 185 students. As the writing samples arrived, Lee Rumbarger and Gary Hohenberger submitted an application to the Council of Writing Program Administrators to fund the preliminary stages of this study.

Unfortunately, by the time we reviewed the College’s previous work on writing, formulated questions, designed the study, wrote the IRB application, set up the website, and contacted students, the first semester was nearly over, and we received a very low return of student writing samples. We believe that if the proposed study can begin before the first-year Orientation, with strong, continuous support from senior administration and active participation of all freshman writing instructors, as well as incentives for student participation, then there will be more optimal student participation. The writing samples collected in the fall 2009 initiative are not a loss, however, insofar as these original papers can be used at the beginning of the study to develop rubrics for the evaluation of student writing and to calibrate faculty assessments of writing.

We also used information from previous Assessment Committees to inform our ongoing assessment of student writing instruction. Notes from the Senior Assessment Luncheon of 2009 indicated that many students believed their theses and other senior year exercises had been essential to their development as writers and scholars. This led us to think about the possible range of expectations across majors, so we surveyed chairs and directors of departments and programs about the capstone experiences for their majors, with particular attention to the practice of writing. We also asked graduating seniors to reflect on their capstone experiences as part of the 2010 Senior Assessment Luncheon.

- **Recommendation 2. We recommend that the College undertake in 2011-2012 the intensive, longitudinal study of student writing development described in the 2009-2010 Assessment Committee's proposal.**

Task 2: The Middle States Fourteen Standards of Excellence

Historically, some individual Assessment Committee foci (student writing, for example) required several years' attention, so the prospect of assessing fourteen standards of excellence every ten years seemed a bit daunting. As we worked through the fourteen standards, however, we concluded that certain aspects of the institution's self-assessment already implicitly, if not explicitly, address Middle States criteria. The following recommendations for assessing the Middle States Fourteen Standards of Excellence include several recommendations that simply make explicit some of the assessments already implicit in our institutional operations. We include the Middle States language at the beginning of each section for ease of reference.

Standard 1. Mission & Goals

The institution's mission clearly defines its purpose within the context of higher education and indicates who the institution serves and what it intends to accomplish. The institution's stated goals, consistent with the aspirations and expectations of higher education, clearly specify how the institution will fulfill its mission. The mission and goals are developed and recognized by the institution with the participation of its members and its governing body and are used to develop and shape its programs and practices and to evaluate its effectiveness.

The 2007-2008 Assessment Committee presented at the 2008 faculty assessment retreat a proposed revision of the mission statement, based in large part on the results of the 2007 faculty assessment retreat. This exercise initiated more widespread conversation about the mission statement, and highlighted the need for the college to develop procedures for the adoption, assessment, and periodic revision of its mission statement.

The 2009-2010 Assessment Committee addressed Standard 1 at the levels of College, Departments and Programs and Committees.

College level: The proposed governance review oversight or steering committee (currently projected as four trustees, four FPCC members, the President, and two *ex officio* students) will include provisions for the writing, revision, and acceptance of a College Mission Statement in its review of the Governance.

Recommendation 3: We recommend that our revised governing document(s) provide

- **clear processes for the periodic review of the mission statement and for the adoption, implementation, and assessment of specific institutional goals.**

- **guidelines for how Vassar College as an institution sets priorities among the various foci of its mission statement and disseminates this information across its constituencies**
- **guidelines for how we measure the degree to which we attain each of our mission statement's goals**
- **processes by which to communicate these findings and recommend appropriate enhancements of or modifications to College practices.**

Department/Program level: In the past, Departments and Programs and other constituent groups of the College also were encouraged to develop mission statements and/or goals.

- **Recommendation 4: We recommend that Departments' and Programs' annual reports assess their year's work, at least in part, in terms of the College mission statement and of their departmental or program mission statement and goals. (How did you work this year as a department/program fulfill the mission of Vassar College? How did your year's work align with your department's/program's stated mission and goals?)**

Committee level:

- **Recommendation 5: We recommend that committee annual reports include self-assessments of the committee's work in terms of its mission and goals, and that these reports be made available to faculty through a common website.**

Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal

An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission and goals, develops objectives to achieve them, and utilizes the results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal. Implementation and subsequent evaluation of the success of the strategic plan and resource allocation support the development and change necessary to improve and to maintain institutional quality.

Priorities and Planning (P&P) and Campus Master Planning Committees, as well as planning committees formed for new projects, like the proposed science facility, may be the best place to start with self-assessment of planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal. The office of the Dean of Planning and Academic Affairs might be a reasonable administrative locus for these assessment activities.

- **Recommendation 6: We recommend that our governing document(s) clearly assign responsibility for the periodic and systematic institutional self-assessment of planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal and for the communication of the results of those self-assessments. As a part of this**

process, we also recommend that college-level planning committees be better coordinated and/or consolidated.

Standard 3: Institutional Resources

The human, financial, technical, physical facilities, and other resources necessary to achieve an institution's mission and goals are available and accessible. In the context of the institution's mission, the effective and efficient uses of the institution's resources are analyzed as part of ongoing outcomes assessment.

The ongoing assessments of and improvements in this area seems to fall in the areas of strategic planning, sustainability, disability services, etc. The work of assessing this area also seems to fall within the portfolio of the Dean of Planning and Academic Affairs, working in conjunction with the Vice President for Finance and Administration and with all of the relevant committees (Campus Master Planning Committee, Sustainability Committee, Committee on the Library, Committee on Academic Technologies, etc.).

- **Recommendation 7: We recommend that our governing document(s) clearly assign responsibility for the periodic and systematic institutional self-assessment of the availability, accessibility, effective and efficient use of resources and for the appropriate communication of the results of those self-assessments.**

Standard 4: Leadership and Governance

The institution's system of governance clearly defines the roles of institutional constituencies in policy development and decision-making. The governance structure includes an active governing body with sufficient autonomy to assure institutional integrity and to fulfill its responsibilities of policy and resource development, consistent with the mission of the institution.

The College already has begun to address this concern through its formation of a Governance review committee comprised of the President, four trustees, four members of FPCC, and student representatives.

- **Recommendation 8: We recommend that the governance review committee more clearly define the role of institutional constituencies in policy development and decision-making. We also recommend that it build into our governing document(s) procedures for the periodic and systematic institutional self-assessment of policy development and decision making practices and provide for the appropriate communication of the results of those self-assessments.**

Standard 5: Administration

The institution's administrative structure and services facilitate learning and

research/scholarship, foster quality improvement, and support the institution's organization and governance

The senior officers and staff seem to be the natural team to begin to self-assess their effectiveness. The Governance currently outlines responsibilities of different administrative offices.

- **Recommendation 9: We recommend that the governance review committee more clearly define review processes for all senior officers (President, Vice Presidents, and Deans).**

Standard 6: Integrity

In the conduct of its programs and activities involving the public and the constituencies it serves, the institution demonstrates adherence to ethical standards and its own stated policies, providing support for academic and intellectual freedom.

The standard of integrity applies to all constituents and activities of the College. Committees and panels charged specifically with integrity-related concerns include the Academic Panel (integrity of student academic work), the College Regulations Panel (integrity of nonacademic aspects of student life), the Institutional Review Board and Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (for compliance with ethical principles in research), and Campus Investor Responsibility Committee and Trustee Investor Responsibility Committee (for integrity of investments).

There are procedures in place for conflict of interest disclosures from trustees, senior officers, department chairs and program directors as well as for any faculty or staff who may receive funding from outside sources. These and other matters of integrity related to finances fall with the VP of Finance and Administration. Concerns about fair and impartial practices, appropriate disclosure, and academic and intellectual freedom may be addressed on a case-by-case basis through the offices and according to the procedures outlined in the Governance.

- **Recommendation 10: We recommend that the governance review committee continue to monitor these procedures, which we believe are adequate. We also recommend, especially in light of new technological developments and the temptations they may pose, that students receive more thorough and continuing instruction about appropriate integrity in academic work. We also recommend that faculty be more actively engaged in setting appropriate boundaries for the integrity of student work. We strongly recommend that there be a faculty meeting or dean's retreat devoted to faculty conversation and instruction about how best to support the integrity of student work.**

Standard 7: Institutional Assessment

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that

evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.

The Middle States documents suggest that parts of Standard 7 will fall under Standard 14, as student learning is central to the mission of institutions of higher education. At a more fundamental level, it may be important to assess the familiarity of various constituencies with the College mission and goals.

- **Recommendation 11: We recommend that the process leading to the ratification of the College Mission Statement include opportunities for discussion among the varied constituencies of the College that will help to clarify our institutional values and familiarize the College community with the Mission Statement.**

Standard 8: Student Admissions and Retention

The institution seeks to admit students whose interests, goals, and abilities are congruent with its mission and seeks to retain them through the pursuit of the students' educational goals.

The assessment of student admissions and retention likely is an ongoing agenda item for the Admissions office and the Admissions and Financial Aid committee, with additional relevant information from the Committee on Student Records, the Committee on Leaves and Privileges, and the general faculty.

- **Recommendation 12: We recommend that the Director of Admissions and Financial Aid periodically convene the Admissions and Financial Aid Committee with the Committees on Student Records, Inclusion and Excellence and Leaves and Privileges to assess the effectiveness of their efforts in the areas of student admissions and retention and that they provide some formal report of this process to the general faculty.**

Standard 9: Student Support Services

The institution provides student support services reasonably necessary to enable each student to achieve the institution's goals for students.

The ongoing assessments of and improvements to this area seems to fall in the portfolio of the Dean of the College.

- **Recommendation 13: We recommend that the Dean of the College and other appropriate offices (disabilities, student health, student mental health) include in their annual reports their ongoing self-assessments of the effectiveness of student support services in their area(s) and that they use their assessments to make any recommendations or institute any changes, as appropriate.**

Feedback from the 2010 Senior Assessment Luncheon included some mixed experiences with the Career Development Office. Overall, they sensed that the CDO was very strong for some fields (finance especially) and somewhat less effective in others (the sciences were mentioned).

- **Recommendation 14:** We recommend that the Director of the Career Development Office and Dean of the College work together in the ongoing assessment of students' career development needs and of the CDO's current capacities to meet them, and make appropriate recommendations, as needed, for strengthening the CDO program. We recognize the CDO's relationships with AAVC and academic departments and programs and recommend the continuation and strengthening of these existing relationships for maintaining effective alumnae/alumni career networks. We also recommend that faculty and the CDO help students to develop more realistic expectations of the range and limitations of the CDO's capacities.
- **Recommendation 15:** We recognize AAVC's centrality to the Alumnae/Alumni career network and recommend that AAVC emphasize and enlist participation in it at every possible occasion (reunions, regional meetings, etc.)
- **Recommendation 16:** We recommend that each department and program website establish a professional blog for recent alumnae/alumni and a database of alumnae/alumni postgraduate work.
- **Recommendation 17:** We recommend that the Vassar.edu e-mail address remain available to alumnae/alumni for life.

Standard 10: Faculty

The institution's instructional, research, and service programs are devised, developed, monitored, and supported by qualified professionals.

The ongoing assessments of and improvements to this area seems to fall in the portfolio of the Dean of the Faculty, FASC and the general faculty.

- **Recommendation 18:** We recommend that the governance review committee continue to monitor these procedures, which we believe are adequate in principle.
- **Recommendation 19:** We recommend that continual review of changing expectations for faculty review and promotion in light of the College mission statement.

Standard 11: Educational Offerings

The institution's educational offerings display academic content, rigor, and coherence appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills, for its educational offerings.

Institutional level. The ongoing assessments of and improvements to this area seems to fall in the portfolio of the Committee on Curricular Policy, departments and programs, and the general faculty. Some innovations arise as a result of emerging fields of study and others, specifically due to student interest, as increasingly popular foci of independent majors sometimes evolve into programs (Media Studies, for example)

In a recent assessment of committee structures, the Committee on Committees survey of 2009-2010 and follow-up conversations, several faculty expressed frustration that the Committee on Curricular Policy may be too large and unwieldy to address curricular policy appropriately and suggested either decreasing its membership or forming smaller committees with more focused missions, perhaps one committee charged with strategic planning for curricular change and another committee, charged with the administrative tasks CCP now fulfills.

Department/Program level:

At the department level, we recognize that substantive changes (in curriculum, policy, etc.) typically ensue following an assessment (explicit or implicit, formal or informal) that there may be improvements to the *status quo*.

- **Recommendation 4 begins to address the stated mission and goals of departments and programs as a basis for reviewing any changes.**

Standard 12: General Education

The institution's curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.

Standard 13: Related Educational Activities

The institution's programs or activities that are characterized by particular content, focus, location, mode of delivery, or sponsorship meet appropriate standards.

Historically, much of the Assessment Committee's work has addressed Standards 12 and 13:

2004-2005's Assessment Committee examined the first year experience, including the freshman course and freshman advising, which addresses both general education and related educational activities.

2005-2006 AC elicited the curricular goals of departments and programs.

2006-2007 AC looked at general education and the question of whether there is a core curriculum, and began to identify areas of learning to highlight in the mission statement.

2007-2008 AC instituted the tagging exercise and found that most students' curricula covered most of the areas of learning.

2008-2009 AC considered writing beyond the freshman course and surveyed writing rubrics from departments and programs—what is good writing? (See Bob DeMaria's report.)

2009-2010 considered writing beyond the freshman course as well as how to use results of assessment to improve education. (See Task 1 and Recommendation 2, above.)

The assessment of student learning outcomes (Standard 14) needs to be applied to general education requirements in the Vassar College curriculum. The assessment of student learning in these areas may benefit from greater clarity about expectations for specific student outcomes as well as from greater consistency across our general education requirements. As of Spring 2010, general education requirements include writing, quantitative analysis, and foreign language proficiency. We think the use of parallel guidelines and standards may help to identify general categories of proficiency that can be assessed across specific classes of skills, in order to bring more coherence to our assessment of student learning outcomes in these areas of general education.

- **Recommendation 20: We recommend that CCP convene faculty from across areas for which the College has general requirements (writing, quantitative reasoning, foreign language) in order to develop parallel sets of standards for student competencies that fulfill these requirements. We also recommend parallel structural relationships with CCP for faculty responsible for these areas of instruction. We recommend that the CCP include the Dean of Studies, the Director of the Teaching and Learning Center and instructors in writing, quantitative analysis, and foreign languages in this process. We recommend that CCP, in collaboration with the faculty, develop standards for assessing student learning in each of these areas.**

Another outcome associated with general education is the effectiveness of Vassar education in preparing students for postgraduate opportunities. Preparation for postgraduate experience also is supported by related educational activities, such as field work, junior year abroad, and experiential learning. Statistics on graduate and professional school admissions and fellowships and on post-graduate employment may

provide one perspective on the effectiveness of Vassar in preparing students for a range of postgraduate experiences.

Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution's students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.

(This standard overlaps with **Task 3: Middle States recommendation for the implementation of a comprehensive, organized and sustained process to assess student achievement of institutional, program, and course-level learning outcomes and evidence that student learning and assessment information is used to improve teaching and learning.**)

Task 3.a) to make explicit the ways in which student achievement of institutional, program, and course-level learning outcomes already are being assessed
b) to make explicit the ways in which assessments of student achievement already are being used to improve teaching and learning

- **Recommendation 20 begins to address these tasks at the level of general education and Recommendation 4 begins to address these concerns at the level of departments and programs.**

Task 3 c) to identify and develop additional ways in which student learning outcomes can be assessed directly and systematically
d) to evaluate the relationship of these outcomes, particularly those at the institutional level, to specific aspects of our teaching, to patterns in student use of the Vassar curriculum, to student skills and abilities at the point of matriculation, and other relevant factors
e) to suggest methods and systems by which the College can track and make optimal use of both its external and self-assessments.

- **Recommendation 21: We recommend that the 2010-2011 Assessment Committee, in cooperation with the Director of Institutional Research, focus on developing an initial program of assessment of student learning across four years, beginning with a senior year Wabash study assessment during the spring of 2011.**

Vassar does not currently have a formal, systematic program of student learning assessment to track four years of educational development at the institutional level. However, we believe that we can begin by using data from the Wabash Study initiated in the freshman year of the 2011 graduating class. These first-year data will serve as a baseline assessment of student learning, which will be followed up with a comparable, spring 2011 Wabash Study assessment of the same students.

- **Recommendation 22:** We recommend that the 2010-2011 Assessment Committee gather collateral information, such as the course selections made by individual students in the class of 2011 cohort, for use in examining the relationship of the Vassar curriculum to areas of student learning assessed in the Wabash study. Collateral information may include student majors, division, type and amount of writing required for courses, and/or an updated version of the 2007-2008 tagging exercise, which should include student as well as faculty perceptions of course content.
- **Recommendation 23:** We recommend that the 2011-2012 Assessment Committee, in cooperation with the Director of Institutional Research, use the Wabash Study data to conduct research relevant to student learning and related outcomes. The sources for this research may include data from the 2008 surveys of Vassar faculty and students, respectively, through the Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, Graduate School of Education (HERI) Faculty Survey and the National Survey of Student Engagement Survey (NSSE) developed by the Indiana University School of Education. In addition to the HERI Faculty Survey and NSSE measures, the Director of Institutional Research plans to administer in 2010-2011 the Senior Survey developed by the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE), a group of 31 highly selective liberal arts colleges. The COFHE Senior Survey will follow up the COFHE survey administered when the class of 2011 first enrolled at Vassar. The 2011-2012 Committee on Assessment's work may include suggestions of particular and general studies that would be informative, review and discuss the findings from these studies, and consider further studies, campus communication of the findings (where relevant), and possible recommendations for the College and our curriculum based on this research.
- **Recommendation 24:** We recommend that the Learning, Teaching, and Research Center, in cooperation with the Assessment Committee, focus at least one workshop per year around general and specific issues of assessing student learning outcomes, including modes of evaluation, to assist in faculty assessment at the level of individual courses and student progress.