

Expanding the Learning Community:
Building on Faculty-Student Collaboration to Enhance Student Scholarship

Background

The “new” model for accreditation review assumes that universities are in compliance with foundational standards and “best practices” that include arrangements for accountability and institutional effectiveness. It assumes further that we use student work to evaluate the quality of our curricula and the effectiveness of their delivery. By that theory, completing the “compliance certification review” is expected to be straightforward. But in fact, most colleges and universities find that they are slightly behind the imagined curve and, in any case, there is much to do in assembling the documentation necessary to demonstrate compliance. Faculty and staff members of the Compliance Team at William and Mary have been working to complete this documentation and soon will have a draft for circulation and review.

As part of the core compliance standards, SACS requires universities to develop a plan to “enhance” the quality of student learning. Two closely related assumptions underlie this expectation: (1) universities should use student work to monitor the effectiveness of their curricula; (2) even highly regarded and selective institutions can find ways to enhance the quality of student learning. SACS describes the expected Quality Enhancement Plan as follows:

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), submitted six weeks in advance of the on-site review by the Commission (that would be sometime in February 2006 for us), describes a carefully designed and focused course of action that addresses a well-defined issue or issues directly related to improving student learning. The development of the QEP involves significant participation by the institution’s academic community. The plan should be focused and succinct (no more than seventy-five pages of narrative text and no more than twenty-five pages of support documentation or charts, graphs, and tables).

Members of the SACS Working Group considered a variety of possible topics and reviewed projects pursued by other universities in recent years. We considered approaches to identifying topics. In the course of discussions, we came to believe that there is sufficient agreement about the core values at William and Mary that we could select a topic, offer it as a starting point, and expect that the College community would enlarge and amplify it to become a proper project. It is appropriate to be somewhat strategic here: the topic we select should be responsive to issues raised in the certification review. These considerations guided the efforts that produced this proposal.

We asked ourselves what it means to say that the College offers unique, high-quality learning in a small university setting, and we tried to imagine what William and Mary students would answer. From experience and some survey data, we know that

students regard W&M as the “College of Knowledge” – that is, a place of serious academic pursuits. The same data reveal that in-state students choose the College over UVA because they see themselves as more serious than those who go to Charlottesville. But what does it mean to be serious about academic pursuits? At a minimum, it suggests that students, professors, and other academic and support professionals are engaged in active learning and teaching. More specifically, alumni surveys routinely reveal that students regard one-on-one faculty-student work as the most important of the academic experiences that they have while at William and Mary.

One-to-one faculty-student relationships contribute directly to the ideal of the W&M experience. It is almost certainly true that students have similar guided learning experiences with coaches, administrative staff, and others at the College. We recognize that all good schools emphasize such interactions, but we believe that W&M offers both more of those opportunities and, in general, relationships that are oriented to richer, deeper experiences with higher quality results. Such collaborative work is critical to “higher order” cognitive development, both for advanced undergraduates and for graduate students. It is critical also to the linking of teaching and learning at an institution that aspires to be a world-class small university.

Narrowing our focus for the moment, we can ask what proportions of graduate and undergraduate students pursue collaborative research with faculty members. At Stony Brook University, 41 percent of undergraduates have that experience, some as early as their freshman year. A survey of 121 “research universities” (using the former Carnegie Classification of Research I and II universities) found that 43 percent of those who responded said that about half or more of their students have research experiences (*Reinventing Undergraduate Education: Three Years after the Boyer Report*, no author, 2001: 5). Only about 16.5% said that most or all of their students have such experiences.

How do we compare? How much variation is there across areas of study and departments and programs? How critical do we consider such experiences? Among those undergraduates who have research experiences, what levels of independence are achieved? What proportion of the collaborations produces published or publishable scholarship? How many of the collaborative efforts are supported by internal or external funding sources? What similar experiences do students have with mentors who are not on the teaching faculty? To what extent do merit systems and other arrangements reward professors and others for such efforts? It is not enough to value student learning and participation in the life of the mind. We have to act intentionally in making clear and definite arrangements to support, encourage, and affect the community of learning that we value.

Can we better approach the ideal of the uniquely W&M experience? We believe that we can and should by increasing the level of joint reflection about teaching and learning. We can begin by more carefully tracking our successes in guided independent student work. We can proceed from there to decide how best to further encourage and develop such experiences.

Ideally, this project can be part of a larger effort to encourage students to think about the content of courses beyond the confines of the classroom and in respect to their intellectual development. We are making strides in that process as we develop and implement a process of institutional effectiveness in academic departments and programs and for the general education curriculum. (See [Process of Institutional Effectiveness for Academic Departments and Programs | SACS](#)). This process asks us to be explicit about what we expect students to learn through department, program, general education, and school curricula. This is the strategic connection mentioned earlier. SACS requires that we use student work as the foundation for monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of our curricula. The Process of Institutional Effectiveness that we are implementing is a central piece of meeting that requirement. The project proposed here would build on and contribute directly to our efforts to ensure the effectiveness of our curricula.