

Questions and Thoughts about W&M as a Community of Learners

In a learning community, students, professors, and academic support staff are active learners oriented to common, overlapping, or potentially converging questions, topics, issues, and concerns. Inquiry-based education is the norm rather than the exception. Students are actively invited into the inquiry process. They are not seen or treated as consumers. Faculty members actively inquire about connections, resources, and collaborative processes across specialties, methodologies, disciplines, areas, and schools.

Some questions for W&M:

- Do students see the connections between reading, writing papers, listening to lectures, and participating in class discussions, on the one hand, and engaging intellectually, politically, and socially with their communities, their regions, their nations, and the world, on the other hand?
- Do they see the connections among courses taken in the first two years and those they take in their senior year as they complete the requirements of a major?
- In a conversation with other educated people, would they be able to draw creatively, thoughtfully, and accurately from their various courses to form some coherent line of thought?
- Do undergraduate students understand and appreciate the value of faculty scholarship?

- Do they benefit from the presence and intellectual work of graduate and professional degree programs?
- Do they recognize the value of those programs? Do they see prospects for collaborative work?

Faculty-student collaborative relationships form a core of the ideal of the W&M experience. Almost certainly, all good schools emphasize such interactions, but we believe that W&M offers both more such opportunities and, in general, relationships that are oriented to richer, deeper scholarship with higher quality results. Such collaborative scholarship is critical to “higher order” cognitive development, both for advanced undergraduates and for graduate students. It is also critical to the linking of teaching and scholarship at an institution that aspires to be a world class small university.

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).

How do we compare?

How plausible is an integrated learning community in a small university with selected high-quality graduate and professional programs? Is it reasonable to promote cross-disciplinary, cross-area, cross-school inquiries while at the same time focusing on liberal education, being responsive to accountability demands, and promoting professional and scholarly development at the highest levels?

An analysis of the core learning outcomes identified by a diverse group of observers suggests that it is. The analysis is presented in a report from the American

Association of Colleges and Universities. It examines the desired learning outcomes specified by the Association to Advance Collegiate Business Schools, the Accreditation Board for Engineering & Technology, Inc., the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, the Western and Middle States Commission of Colleges and Schools, and Boeing Corporation. With only minor exceptions, these groups identified a common set of desired learning outcomes: communication skills, inquiry and analysis skills, integrative learning, community/citizenship, ethics and values, global and multicultural orientations, personal development, breadth of knowledge, and lifelong learning. The first four on this list were endorsed by all groups, and are the most central to the ideal of a learning community.