Assessing student achievement and evaluating curricula

The Challenge

Washington College is a private, four-year college of the liberal arts and sciences with an undergraduate enrollment of more than 1,300 students. With a student-faculty ratio of 12:1, the college is dedicated to providing students with a diverse academic environment, individualized attention and opportunities to excel.

Faculty in the psychology department knew that students were mastering their major, but when it came time to assess student learning outcomes, they wanted hard data. “We were looking for a way to assess the quality of our academic program. We wanted to identify strengths and weaknesses in a systematic fashion, and not just use our intuition,” George Spillich, John Toll Professor of Psychology, explained.

The department also wanted to pinpoint any potential strengths and weaknesses in their program. “Our intention was to use the information resulting from that assessment to guide both curricular renewal and future faculty hires. Weaknesses would be met by curricular refreshment and the addition of faculty whose expertise met our needs.”

The Approach

For Spillich, ETS’s Major Field Test in Psychology was the first choice. “I was department Chair at the time, so I proposed the idea to my colleagues, who were quite interested,” he said. “The Major Field Test in Psychology promised to give us a global overview, breakdowns by specific content areas and even a general idea of how we matched up nationwide. That was important to us.”

Offered in 15 undergraduate fields of study and associate business and MBA programs, Major Field Tests evaluate students’ ability to analyze and solve problems, understand relationships and interpret material in their major field of study. They provide an objective, end-of-program measure of student outcomes, present national comparative data for each test, and can be customized to include up to 50 questions added by faculty.

“The administration touts our department as the gold standard for program evaluation at our institution,” he continued. “We couple the Major Field Test with our own outcomes measures and the result is that we feel we have a very sensitive barometer of the learning of our students.”

George Spillich
John Toll Professor of Psychology
Washington College
THE RESULTS

“The results were very informative; we isolated strengths and weaknesses of our academic program and these results made sense,” said Spillich.

“We use the results of the Major Field Test in a thoughtful way, not reflexively. There are some subtests of the Major Field Test in Psychology that measure areas we de-emphasize in our program goals, and so we are neither surprised nor upset if our students do not test strongly on sub-areas that we do not stress or feel important. On the other hand, other specialties that we consider important are also tested by the MFT, and there we pay very close attention to the performance of our seniors on the test.”

WHAT WE LEARNED

Assessing student learning outcomes had a direct impact on the psychology department’s curriculum. “When we identified weak areas, we added appropriate classes and dropped others, and made content changes within existing courses to strengthen our program. The result of these changes was a dramatic improvement by our students in the previously identified weak areas,” explained Spillich. “We require all graduating psychology majors to take the test; we made it part of a course requirement. We have required the test every year since we began this program…we have tested our seniors every year since the Psychology MFT was offered.”

To learn more about the Major Field Tests, call 1-800-745-0269, e-mail highered@ets.org or visit us online at www.ets.org/mft.