Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation
(year three)

WHITMAN COLLEGE™

April 2020

Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation
(year three)

Table of Contents

Part I – Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan

Process of assessing mission fulfillment

Regular assessment of student learning at Whitman College highlights three major academic areas. These include 1) general education; 2) programs of study in the academic majors; 3) individual programs or initiatives with specific outcomes. Overall, the process of assessment is overseen by the Assessment Committee, which is chaired by the Accreditation Liaison Officer. Other members include the Provost and Dean of the Faculty, the three academic division chairs, and one or more representatives from Student Affairs, Whitman College Technology Services, and the Office of Institutional Research. The Assessment Committee discusses all aspects of ongoing assessment and accreditation, and it serves as an advisory board for the Accreditation Liaison Officer. The Assessment Committee, for example, formulated the college's current core themes, objectives, indicators, and benchmarks. The current processes for campus-wide assessment of the academic programs were devised by the Assessment Committee. Although student learning outcomes are the purview of the faculty, the Assessment Committee reviews changes made by academic programs to make sure they are assessable and clear. The Board of Trustees is regularly informed and apprised of assessment data by the Provost and Dean of the Faculty. In this way, assessment data become part of the information that informs the Board's allocation of resources and its implementation of initiatives, as outlined in the college's strategic plan. The process of assessment for each educational element will be discussed below.

At present, the general education program at Whitman consists of two components: the first-year experience (currently a year-long sequence of two courses, called Encounters), and the Distribution Requirements. Encounters serves as an introduction to college work in the liberal arts context for all first-year students. It includes deep, close reading and discussion of important texts and ideas, as well as exploration of non-textual media, with significant time devoted to writing instruction. The current Distribution Requirements are essentially breadth requirements, with students required to take six credits in each of five broad, academic areas (Humanities, Fine Arts, Sciences, Social Sciences, and Cultural Pluralism), and three credits in the Quantitative Analysis area.

The current learning outcomes for Encounters and the Distribution Requirements were adopted by the Whitman faculty in December, 2017 (Appendix 1, https://www.whitman.edu/academics/departments-and-programs/general-studies/encounters/learning-goals, and https://www.whitman.edu/academics/departments-and-programs/general-studies/distribution-requirements). Beginning in spring 2018, systematic assessment of these general education components commenced. For Encounters, assessment is overseen by the Director of Encounters, in consultation with the Accreditation Liaison Officer. Every year since adoption, either one or two of the Encounters learning outcomes has been assessed; completion of the last two learning outcomes will occur in spring 2020. Depending on the learning outcome, student work and/or comprehension are evaluated and scored by the faculty teaching the Encounters course sections, and those data are passed on to the Director. The Encounters learning outcomes were designed to map onto general education indicators and objectives, and ultimately the mission of the college. The institutional benchmark for achievement for Encounters is to achieve benchmarks for 75% of the learning outcomes. With two benchmarks out of three successfully achieved so far, and with two more yet to be assessed,

the college is making good progress. The very first learning outcome to be assessed came very close to meeting the benchmark, so it seems that the college is on track to attain this institutional benchmark.

Much like Encounters, the Distribution Requirements have been assessed beginning in spring 2018, since the adoption of the Distribution Requirement learning outcomes in December 2017. Every course that fulfills one or more Distribution Requirement areas is assessed, and the individual course instructors are responsible for assessing and reporting one student learning outcome per distribution area per course. It is up to the instructor to choose which learning outcome(s) to assess, as well as to determine the mechanism by which the outcome(s) will be assessed, as well as to determine the benchmark(s) for outcome achievement in their particular course(s). The results are submitted online, directly to the Office of Institutional Research, which analyzes and reports the data annually to the Accreditation Liaison Officer. Similar to the Encounters learning outcomes, the outcomes for the Distribution Requirements were designed to map onto the college's general education indicators and objectives, and finally onto the college's mission. Results of Distribution Requirement assessment data will be discussed below.

The assessment of the learning outcomes in the major programs is designed similarly, building on the goals of general education, while incorporating more discipline-specific skills, thought processes, and increasingly sophisticated work, which are expectations as students progress through their majors (for example, close reading of discipline-specific literature or writing evidence-based manuscripts). In addition, major program student learning outcomes capture discipline-specific content knowledge acquisition, as well as student development of nuanced, integrated understanding and independent, creative thinking within a discipline. Each year, faculty from every major program agree on an assessment for a programmatic student learning outcome of their choosing, as long as all of the program's learning outcomes are assessed at least once every three years. The assessment may be carried out in conjunction with a component of the senior capstone experience or another component of the major, such as a keystone course. Results of the assessment are submitted online directly to the Office of Institutional Research, which then analyzes and summarizes the data. Student learning outcomes for the major programs have been designed to capture discipline-specific knowledge and skills that map onto the college's indicators and objectives, and by extension, the mission of the college. A brief summary of the results of program assessment to date will be discussed below.

In addition to general education and the major programs, there are parts of the curriculum that don't fit neatly into these two categories. Among these include: programs offered through Off-Campus Studies, the Global Studies certificate program, the Chemistry 111 course for students with minimal preparation for college chemistry, courses and services offered through Penrose Library, and the first-year writing assessment. There are also co-curricular programs that, while not part of the formal academic programs, nonetheless incorporate and foster many aspects of student learning. These include but are not limited to: Residence Life, Athletics, the Outdoor Program, the Intercultural Center, and the Student Engagement Center. Each of these components of the student learning experience is assessed independently on an ongoing basis, and some are more regularized than others. For example, the first-year writing assessment is completed every year, and the results of the assessment are reported to the Accreditation Liaison Officer. The Global Studies certificate program has an assessment plan, but it is a brand new

program with very few certificate recipients so far. Residence Life regularly assesses its programming and the overall student experience. However, the data are reported to the Cabinet and Board of Trustees through the Student Affairs side of the college's organizational structure, instead of through Academic Affairs channels.

Assessment data are collected at the end of each semester for courses that fulfill Distribution Requirements, and at the end of the academic year for Encounters and for major program assessments. Data from the first-year writing assessment are reported every December. The Office of Institutional Research analyzes and reports the Distribution Requirement, first-year writing assessment, and major program data to the Accreditation Liaison Officer, while the Director of Encounters reports the assessment data for Encounters. Part of the assessment process involves faculty evaluating their individual or programmatic results and strategizing about whether and how to make changes to their course(s) of instruction (content, pedagogy, assessment method, etc.) or to the content or organization of their curriculum. Planned changes are submitted as part of the online assessment form. Once every fall, the Accreditation Liaison Officer makes a report to the faculty, summarizing the results of the college's assessment activities for the most recent year, noting trends and/or changes from previous years (Appendix 2). In the end, all of the collected assessment data are compared to the institutional benchmarks for achievement. Since the student learning outcomes map onto indicators and objectives for general education and the major programs, as well as onto the overall mission of the college, Whitman's process of assessment serves as a gauge of mission fulfillment.

Although student learning is the prime directive of the college, it is also true that many other aspects of the student experience play important roles in mission fulfillment. For example, Whitman College, like other institutions of higher education, has become increasingly cognizant of issues surrounding accessibility, equity, diversity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging for all students who matriculate. Indeed, such factors impact whether student learning can effectively take place at all, and thus they have a significant bearing on student success. In addition, Whitman has recently been placing increased priority on preparing students for their lives after graduation from the college and has implemented or augmented programs that facilitate post-graduation success and fulfillment. To summarize, the college gathers data in a number of ways in order to evaluate the overall student experience so that it can elucidate and improve the factors that affect that experience. Examples include student entrance and exit surveys, institutional data on a wide variety of college and student parameters, internal surveys, programmatic data from across campus, and periodic external reviews of all academic and non-academic departments. Some of these areas will be addressed briefly in this document, and a summary of progress on all the college's indicators can be found in Appendix 3. However, the substance of the report will be devoted to the discussion of student learning assessment, as noted in the NWCCU guidelines for Mid-Cycle Evaluation Reports.

Core Themes and Objectives

Whitman's first core themes were adopted in 2011. They were: 1) academic excellence; 2) student engagement, personal development, and leadership; and 3) collaboration and community. They fit well enough at the time, but as the college's administration changed, a fresh round of strategic planning ensued. A new college mission statement was ratified, and the core themes and objectives were reconstituted in order to better reflect the college's new priorities. As of 2018,

the core themes became: 1) an accessible, diverse, and inclusive community; 2) a rigorous, liberal arts education; and 3) support for life and learning beyond the classroom. The current core themes have been in place for two years, and they are still relevant and valid. They are well-aligned with the college's mission and with the objectives, indicators, and student learning outcomes.

Evidence from current core themes and potential changes

Overall, the core themes, indicators, and their rationales are still sound. As the campus changes over time, some indicators become dated and need to be deleted, replaced, or revised. The current core themes and indicators were constructed in 2017-2018, so they are still quite appropriate. In particular, those found in Core Theme II: A Rigorous, Liberal Arts Education, are fitting, as they are the indicators most directly associated with student learning and thus are the focus of this report. The aspects of assessment framework that have proven most problematic are the benchmarks, and for the purposes of this report, particularly those found in Core Theme II, Objectives 3 and 4, which specify goals for depth and breadth, respectively, in a Whitman education. The benchmarks for achievement of these objectives are based on meeting a certain "bar," past which the outcome is achieved, and below which the outcome is not. The benchmarks were set by the Assessment Committee, which collectively made a best guess for these institutional benchmarks. This created an arbitrarily-set pass/fail mechanism which does not adequately include or convey the nuances of many factors that we are actually trying to encourage, such as: 1) a more diverse student body with different levels of preparation; 2) pedagogical risk-taking and innovation; 3) truly rigorous, challenging, and excellent student work (i.e. a low bar doesn't encourage the stretching and testing of student intellectual limits, while a bar that's too high might never be achieved if the curriculum is genuinely designed to challenge students to think, solve, and create). For the three semesters for which assessment data are available, for example, the percentage of courses in which "bar" benchmarks were met for Distribution Requirements ranged from 58% to 74%. In the 2017-2018 academic year, the Assessment Committee arbitrarily set the institutional benchmark at 75%. The committee had no basis on which to set this benchmark, other than that its members know that Whitman students are, for the most part, highly intelligent and that they tend to take their coursework very seriously – that, and the sentiment of the committee at that time was to aim for aspirational goals. It is worth noting that Whitman College had no mechanism for systematic assessment prior to 2018, so the college as a whole is very new at this process. Now that there are actual results, the college is faced with some important questions. For example, should Whitman keep these benchmarks and keep aiming to meet them, or should Whitman lower its institutional benchmarks? The college could take the latter option, since it is seeming like the benchmarks were set too high in the first place, but this action doesn't change whether students are learning or not. Another question might be, should the college change its expectations for student learning in its courses? The answer to this would be an emphatic 'no,' since "a rigorous, liberal arts education" and high expectations for student performance are at the very core of what Whitman stands for. Whitman prides itself on excellence in teaching and exemplifying the teacher/scholar model for its students. Faculty undergo rigorous review as both teachers and scholars. Our academic programs undergo rigorous external reviews, and faculty/student interaction, as well as student participation in a vibrant co-curriculum, are aspects of their education that every student can expect. It is evident from faculty comments on their assessment submissions that they take

assessment results very seriously, and they are thoughtful about "closing the loop" so that their pedagogies improve, and their mechanisms of evaluating student work are sound. Thus, rather than ask questions that are answered by adjustments of bars or by changing the level of expectation for Whitman students, it seems more prudent to ask, "Are Whitman students learning?" In other words, are they growing in their capacity to become scholars in their own right? At Whitman, this goal is achieved through an enormous commitment by faculty and students to engage seriously with subject matter and to cultivate independent thinking, creativity, and the ability to use evidence to formulate and support opinions and arguments. In sum, in order to make an effort aimed toward rectifying the drawbacks of arbitrary institutional, program, and course benchmarks, Whitman is planning for its new general education program to have student learning outcomes that are based on student growth, rather than on students reaching a subjective, and thus meaningless, bar. Moreover, the current student learning outcomes for general education were not passed by the faculty until December, 2017, many years after the current general education curriculum had been in place. With the new curriculum coming on board, the college has the opportunity to formulate new student learning outcomes with great intentionality and discretion. Similarly, the institutional benchmark for major programs of study is currently set at 75% of student learning outcomes achieved. In spring 2018, 70% of major programs achieved self-identified benchmarks for achievement, and in 2018-2019, 73% of benchmarks were met, which is good progress toward the goal. It is also worth pointing out that benchmarks for other indicators within Core Theme II are being met or are progressing nicely, especially those for which the benchmark involves college support for student learning.

As far as Core Themes I and III, the objectives and indicators therein are critical to accessibility, equity, and inclusion, and more generally to student success at Whitman. Only a few will be mentioned here as examples of progress in these areas at the college, since student learning is the focus of the Mid-Cycle Report. One example would be Whitman's commitment to provide equitable access to a Whitman education. Gapping between the level of financial aid and demonstrated student need has been reduced from about $6,000 to about $4,000. The student body has become progressively more diverse over the last five years (Appendix 4 or linked at https://www.whitman.edu/institutional-research/factbook). New student pre-orientation trips have not only been maintained, but they are being re-envisioned so that all students, regardless of ability to pay, have the opportunity for a pre-college community-building experience. Beginning with the 2019-2020 academic year, when students receive funding to present their research at conferences, they now also receive money for meals. This allows for all students, regardless of means, to participate in professional research conferences. These are just a few representative examples for indicators from Core Themes I and III.

The core themes as a whole have been modestly helpful as an organizational tool, but they have always felt like a layer of bureaucracy that the Accreditation Liaison Officer was responsible for peddling to the campus. The core themes were basically devised by the Assessment Committee, and while they were officially adopted by the Board of Trustees, the core themes were not a topic of discussion during strategic planning deliberations among the Cabinet-level administration and the Board, nor were they part of strategic planning focus groups or discussions among faculty and staff on campus. Moreover, core themes were not an element of conversation and planning at the level of student learning outcome development at the course, program, or institutional level. They are simply not normally a part of campus consciousness. On the other hand, the intentional

mapping of student learning outcomes to strategic planning priorities and the mission of the college is very much a part of campus awareness. The fact that the core theme layer (inserted by the Assessment Committee as a requirement for accreditation) was able to align well is directly related to this intentionality. In sum, the core themes "fit," but they are an extra (some might say unnecessary) layer that nobody really thinks about on a day-to-day basis. Given that the NWCCU has announced that core themes will now be optional, it is likely that Whitman College will do away with them, and that their demise will go largely unnoticed, except for by the Assessment Committee, the members of which will probably not be sorry to see them go. In the future, mapping will likely be more direct: student learning outcomes $\rightarrow$ strategic planning priorities and the college mission (although this will need to be discussed at length by the Assessment Committee). Whatever the final outcome at Whitman, the college applauds the NWCCU for making core themes optional.

Part II – Representative Examples of Assessment of Student Learning

Example 1 – The first year writing assessment

There is a single, bold indicator that encompasses Whitman's first-year writing assessment, as well as many other writing-related initiatives. The indicator is simply, "Written Communication." This indicator is accompanied by a rationale, which states, "The ability to communicate effectively in writing requires creativity, imagination, patience, and effort to arrive at the finished product. It is an essential component of a rigorous liberal arts education." The word "essential" conveys the importance that Whitman places on the ability to write well. No student should graduate without the ability to write fluently. There are writing-related learning outcomes throughout Whitman's general education curriculum, as well as in the curricula of the major programs. In this sense, the single indicator is meaningful and sufficient because it encompasses many writing-centered learning outcomes. With this as background, prior to 2017-2018, faculty were noticing that fewer students were coming to Whitman with the requisite basic writing skills necessary for them to progress sufficiently toward the goal of becoming fluent writers. A small group of concerned faculty proposed the first year writing assessment, and the resources to support it were granted by the administration. Since the first year writing assessment was the subject of Whitman's application for the inaugural NWCCU Beacon Award, only a brief summary of the program will be provided here. A full copy of the application, as well as the annual summaries and a graph summarizing the results of the first three years of implementation, are included in Appendix 5a-e. In November 2019, Whitman was honored as the first Beacon Award recipient for small colleges.

Since the first writing assessment in fall 2017, all first-year students entering Whitman College are required to participate in a writing evaluation during orientation week (the pre-test). After giving students 20 minutes to respond to a prompt, writing samples are scored on a scale from 0-4 across six dimensions: focus and thesis; support and development; structure and organization; awareness of audience and sense of voice; sentence clarity; and knowledge of conventions – thus a perfect score would be 24. Students with the lowest scores are automatically enrolled in Whitman's introductory writing course, which is designed to introduce students to analytical writing. All first year students, whether placed into the introductory writing course or not, are also enrolled in a section of Encounters, Whitman's required first year course. At the end of the semester, all first year students repeat the evaluation exercise using a different prompt (the post-test).

At the beginning of their entry into college, first year students who were placed into the introductory writing course had average scores of 10.3, 9.4, and 10.0 for the initial assessments carried out at the beginning of the fall semesters of 2017, 2018, and 2019, respectively. Students who were not placed into the introductory writing course and thus took only Encounters had initial average scores of: 16.1, 15.5, and 15.4 for the same tests and times. So for fall 2017, 2018 and 2019, the gaps in scores between those who placed into the introductory writing course and those who did not were: 5.8, 6.1, and 5.4, respectively. At the end of those semesters, when the post-tests were analyzed, the good news was that all students improved in their writing abilities. The great news was that the gaps in scores between students who took introductory writing and those who took only Encounters decreased, to 3.0, 2.2, and 2.6, respectively. Thus, the average

gap over those years (5.76) was reduced by more than half (to 2.60). Those data are summarized in the graph in Appendix 5e.

The data have been presented annually to the Whitman College faculty, and also to the Whitman College administration, which has been extremely supportive of the first year writing assessment initiative. The data have been used in several ways to bolster the goal of proficiency in writing. First, the faculty who spearheaded this effort noted after the first iteration that more students could, and should, benefit from introductory writing instruction. The administration responded to the positive data with appropriate funding and staffing. Since its inception, the number of introductory writing sections offered has grown from six to twelve per year, doubling the number of students able to take advantage of this opportunity to improve their writing. Notably, the "shrinking gap" phenomenon is consistent over time, even when the number of students is increased considerably, which corroborates the reliability of the program. Second, while the college in general is inspired by the results of the first year writing assessment, the outcomes also served as an alert that there is more work to be done. Specifically, there was an overall recognition that there needs to be more focused and intentional efforts directed toward writing instruction, campus-wide. For the past 2.5 years, Whitman has been in the process of reimagining its general education curriculum – both the required first year courses and the distribution (breadth) requirements. The new first-year experience courses, approved by the faculty in spring 2019, will be implemented in fall 2020. They will incorporate several elements dedicated to writing proficiency. Among them include: writing-specific student learning outcomes; some class periods devoted to writing-related activities; a Writing Mentor, who will serve as a mentor to faculty and who will assist faculty with writing instruction, assignment development, and other writing-related matters; and ongoing faculty professional development that focuses especially on writing instruction and inclusive pedagogy. Third, the first year writing assessment is a perfect example of assessment that measures and celebrates student growth. Because of the encouraging outcomes of the first year writing assessment, student learning outcome benchmarks for the new general education curriculum will be based on student growth, as opposed to an arbitrarily-set bar of achievement. Fourth, writing will have a more prominent place in all of the general education curriculum than it has in the past. The extant, dated general education curriculum values writing but to some extent simply assumes that writing is being learned. The new curriculum that is under development will be up for a vote of faculty approval in spring 2020 and will have writing as an explicitly required area of concentration, in particular in the middle years of the college curriculum. Currently, writing instruction is most emphasized in the first year experience courses, and then during the senior year capstone experiences (e.g. senior theses). There is nothing explicit that encourages writing proficiency during the sophomore and junior years. The intent of the new general education curriculum is to rectify that by incorporating a writing component during those years.

Example 2 – The department of Chemistry

When Whitman initiated a systematic assessment plan for its academic programs in spring 2018, many departments and programs were underprepared to take on the task. General learning goals were mostly in place, but many needed to be reworked into assessable student learning outcome language. Mechanisms for assessment needed to be set up, as did benchmarks for achievement. These tasks were met with varying amounts of skepticism by the faculty, but one

(not the only) department that took the assignment to heart was the department of Chemistry. After the initial round of assessment was complete, the department held a retreat in spring 2018 in order to allow faculty to completely rework, reorganize, and orchestrate more effective and meaningful assessment of student learning. The differences between the spring 2018 assessment and the 2018-2019 assessment of Chemistry department student learning outcomes can be seen in Appendix 6a. The department's overall assessment plan can be seen in its entirety in Appendix 6b. The goals for achievement of student learning outcomes are clearly on track.

The department of Chemistry has relatively few majors, in the scope of the entire college. However, the Chemistry department teaches enormous numbers of students. Students majoring in the life sciences (Biology and BBMB); Geology; combined majors such as Biology/Environmental Studies, Geology/Astronomy, etc.; and non-majors on pre-health-profession tracks must all take introductory chemistry courses, since the material contained in those courses is foundational for the other sciences. The immense popularity of those other science majors means that every year, the Chemistry department faculty can count on 40-50% of the incoming class (almost 200 students) taking introductory chemistry. As Whitman has tried to diversify its student body, there are more students coming from a diverse array of backgrounds, and an increasing number of those students come to introductory chemistry underprepared for the rigorous curriculum. In order to help underprepared students succeed, the Chemistry department did two things: 1) instituted/changed the chemistry placement test; 2) introduced a companion course for students with low scores on the revised chemistry placement test.

For many years, the chemistry placement test was completely optional for incoming students. It was essentially meant to track students into either regular General Chemistry, or, for those who had had lots of high school chemistry and scored high on the placement test, into Advanced General Chemistry. This arrangement was satisfactory for a long time, but in recent years, the Chemistry faculty began to notice that a subset of students consistently failed to thrive in General Chemistry. Eager for clues as to why this was happening, they asked the office of Institutional Research to gather data on the math SAT scores of incoming students. Incoming students with low math SAT scores roughly correlated with low test scores and low grades in General Chemistry. The Chemistry department responded by changing the chemistry placement exam and making it required instead of optional. The new placement exam was divided into two sets of questions: quantitative reasoning and chemical reasoning.

The second course of action taken by Chemistry department faculty was to develop a companion course to General Chemistry. This course is called Chem 111 – Problem Solving in Chemistry. It is a 1-credit course, graded credit/no credit, and it is designed specifically for students needing extra support with the mathematical manipulations necessary to solve problems in chemistry. Students who score low on the quantitative reasoning section of the placement exam are strongly encouraged to enroll in introductory General Chemistry and Chem 111. It should be noted that Chem 111 is not required (i.e. students may opt out of taking the course, even though their placement scores indicate that it is strongly recommended for them). Two sections of this course are routinely offered every fall, accommodating up to 50 students (25 students per section). Thus, instead of dividing students into two tracks, the new chemistry placement exam divides them into three: Advanced General Chemistry; regular General Chemistry; and General Chemistry plus Chem 111.

The newly revised, and now required, chemistry placement exam and the companion Chem 111 course have been in effect for three years. Data are collected and organized by the General Chemistry lecture coordinator, who is also one of the instructors who rotates in to teach Chem 111. The coordinator provides the data to the department members collectively, who then discuss appropriate content changes for the placement exam and/or the Chem 111 course. Student data from these years is preliminarily encouraging. A comparison of how students did on their very first chemistry exam (too soon for Chem 111 to have had much of an effect) with how they did, on average, on the subsequent exams (after having taken Chem 111 for more time), shows that students who took Chem 111 improved more on their subsequent exams than students who either took only the General Chemistry course or those who qualified for Chem 111 but opted not to take it. Moreover, the percentage of students who improved their exam score average after the first exam was highest in the "plus Chem 111" group compare to students who did not take Chem 111 (Appendix 7).

The indicators for the Chemistry major are meaningful and appropriate and are serving the department nicely in their capacity to assess student learning. As for Chem 111 and whether it is contributing to student success, not only in Chemistry but in students' progression into other majors in the sciences, the department is cautiously optimistic. Plans are to continue with the placement exam and Chem 111 in the hope that more of the students who come to Whitman underprepared for the rigors of introductory chemistry will be aided in their quest to succeed in the sciences. The data indicate that the department is on the right path.

The Chemistry department's efforts are completely aligned with a broader institutional response to some earlier data that showed that, in general, traditionally underrepresented (students of color; low-income) students received lower grades in science courses and in science majors than traditionally overrepresented (mostly white; more affluent) students. In response to these data, the college applied for a grant from HHMI to create a STEM HUB, an informal space where students could gather, form study groups, work on projects, etc. The grant application was denied, but the data were so compelling that Whitman's administration approved the renovation of the space for this purpose anyway. As of fall 2019, the STEM HUB is open and active. Faculty are encouraged to have office hours and review sessions there, and it is an open, welcoming, heavily-used space (Appendix 8).

Part III – Evaluative Overview: Looking forward to Year Seven

Altogether, the overall process of academic assessment is working well. In order to successfully navigate the years leading up to Year Seven and mission fulfillment, the college will need to continue accumulating assessment data. Whitman is new to systematic assessment, not having started such a process until spring 2018. More data will give Whitman a better idea of trends in student learning, which will enable faculty and the college as a whole to more effectively set benchmarks for achievement, for example. Specific assessment work will need to be accomplished in the following areas: 1) implementation of the new general education curriculum; 2) encouraging the incorporation of growth-oriented student learning outcomes in areas besides general education – especially in the major programs and co-curricular programs where they are appropriate; 3) more consistent and communicated learning outcome assessment in co-curricular programs; and 4) consideration of whether to officially do away with the college's existing core themes.

First, the Whitman College faculty have already voted to implement a set of new first year courses beginning in fall 2020. Each semester of the two-semester sequence already has a set of overarching course learning goals. During the 2019-2020 academic year, the General Studies Committee has been working to mold these into student learning outcome language that is focused on student growth. Future work that needs to be accomplished prior to fall 2020 includes educating faculty on designing assignments that effectively assess student growth in light of these student learning outcomes. A new model for the broader component of general education (what we now call Distribution Requirements and will likely be called something else) is in development and will be put before the faculty for approval in spring 2020. Overall learning goals for each of the proposed breadth areas are in place. During the "implementation year" of 2020-2021, these too must be reworked into growth-oriented student learning outcome language, and faculty must be educated on how to create assignments that assess them. It is imperative that, as the new general education curriculum becomes part of the academic fabric of the college, the student learning outcomes genuinely reflect what the faculty expect students to learn. Whitman must take a lesson from the past and thoughtfully and proactively adopt appropriate student learning outcomes as the curriculum is being developed, rather than tacking them on later, out of necessity.

Second, some faculty in the major programs have expressed dissatisfaction with "bars" as benchmarks for achievement of student learning outcomes. This is understandable given the particular vagaries of the various academic disciplines. In some cases, faculty may well decide that a certain percentage of students meeting a particular bar or score is a perfectly appropriate proxy for student achievement. However, other areas of study might be less amenable to such measurements. As growth-focused student learning outcomes are appraised in the general education program, the academic disciplines for which they are appropriate will be encouraged to incorporate them into their major program assessments. The first year writing assessment at Whitman has been an excellent example for illustrating how assessments that measure student growth can be extremely worthwhile and can result in real change.

Third, the college should more conscientiously and consistently assess student learning in co-curricular programs on campus. A great deal of highly valuable student learning takes place

outside the (albeit increasingly blurred) boundaries of the academic program. As the definition of student success incorporates qualities such as critical thinking, empathy, creative problem-solving, and leadership potential, assessment data from areas such as Residence Life; Sports Studies, Recreation and Athletics; and the Student Engagement Center should more readily make its way into the hands of those who make decisions concerning allocation of resources, with conscientious cross-talk between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs.

Fourth, over the next year the college will need to decide whether to keep its core themes or abandon them. As discussed previously, Whitman's core themes have not been part of day-to-day conversations, but they were very recently revised, and thus they appropriately divide the college's objectives and indicators into logical, larger constellations. If the core themes fade into the sunset, the Assessment Committee will need to decide if and how to reorganize our indicators and how to map them onto the mission of the college, either directly or via the planks of the college's strategic plan.

Finally, there should be an acknowledgement in this report on the value of informal assessment. At Whitman, the most successful examples of assessment seem to have occurred, at least so far, outside the formal assessment structure. There is good reason for regularized assessment of student learning, and Whitman's inaugural years of campus-wide assessment have yielded some mixed results but have been mostly positive. For the most part, faculty, as individuals and in programmatic groups, have been very thoughtful in their analyses of formal assessment data and in making appropriate changes to their courses, programs, and learning outcomes. However, in the examples presented here, there was a perceived need, followed by a data gathering phase, followed by a grassroots effort to address the need, with affirming results. This last step occurs when faculty use data to convince themselves and/or the administration that things should change. These efforts, specifically the first year writing assessment, the chemistry placement exam/Chem 111 course, and the STEM HUB, have not been part of the formal assessment process (i.e. they are not on paper as explicit indicators with benchmarks), yet they are aligned perfectly with Core Theme I: An accessible, diverse, and inclusive community, under Objective 3 – Students are able to participate fully in all programs of the college, and also Objective 4 – The college will create and maintain programs that nurture students' sense of belonging within the college community. These efforts serve to help equal the playing field for a significant subset of incoming new students, who face real and significant challenges when they arrive on campus underprepared for college level writing and science, respectively. Importantly, such changes on campus make belonging and success for attainable for all students. As the college strives to become more diverse and inclusive, programs like these, that make students from all walks of life feel as though they belong here and can succeed here are becoming more and more important. Grassroots endeavors like these should be encouraged, even though they make it into assessment reporting through a "back door."

All in all, the assessment process at Whitman is underway and working. Formal assessment is complemented by effective, informal assessment. Most importantly, all assessment is aligned with the mission of the college. Looking forward, Whitman is positioned to have a favorable outcome of mission fulfillment in Year Seven.

Appendices