

# Accountability, where it counts

*By the authority vested in me by the Trustees and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I confer upon each of you the degree of Bachelor of Arts and declare you to be entitled to all the rights, privileges, and honors pertaining to that degree. In testimony thereof, and as evidence that you have fulfilled all the requirements, the Trustees grant you the diploma of Wheaton College.*

The privilege of delivering that line each spring is one of the great pleasures of the college presidency. It is one statement guaranteed to be met with a roar of approval. Aside from being the signal for celebration, it also is a solemn affirmation that each of the soon-to-be-alumnae/i seated in the Dimple has satisfied the faculty's requirements for the degree. For some, that assurance may no longer be enough.

Inspired by the cost of college and questions of classroom quality, higher education faces an inquiring public. In response, the federal government is considering measures addressing the perception that academe answers to no one. As I write this, a commission appointed by U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings is considering several plans to assess the quality of undergraduate education, including a national test to be required for graduation. The goal is admirable, but the proposed solution is, at best, symbolic, not unlike the pomp and circumstance of commencement. At worst, current plans could weaken American higher education's greatest strength: the wide variety in types of colleges and universities and their unique missions.

The commission's proposal overlooks a simple fact: undergraduate programs vary considerably. Different types of institutions, indeed even different programs within a single institution, tackle very different subject matter and skills. The engineering student's course of study varies considerably from the chemistry major's or the aspiring musician's. Most important, no single standardized test can provide an accurate assessment of the multiple learning outcomes expected. But this does not mean that we should simply throw our hands up in the air in despair over the impossibility of evaluating the quality of education.



All higher education institutions do, or should, share one goal: effecting a substantial difference in students' knowledge and capabilities. Assessing the quality of learning is no easy matter. How does one measure transformation? A quickened intellect? Curiosity come alive? A heightened concern for justice or preservation of the environment? A newfound ease in analyzing complex issues? All of the above. But evaluating *how* and *why* we encourage transformation is, to me, a more forward-thinking goal. By nurturing an ongoing culture of excellence through initiatives like the curriculum review and strategic planning, we tell our students and the world that core values—rigor, integrity, equality, diversity, intellectual freedom, tradition, innovation and world citizenship—matter.

We also need to acknowledge that the benefits of a college education continue to emerge for many years after graduation. From my own experience, I know that it can take years to fully appreciate the habits of mind that develop and the new horizons that appear as a result of college study. From the conversations I have with alumnae/i on campus and across the country, I know Wheaton alumnae/i share this experience. Beyond anecdotal data, Wheaton can also point to findings from a regular survey of alumnae/i perspectives on the undergraduate experience, one of several national assessment

initiatives in which the college is involved.

Wheaton is also active in assessing the quality of its programs as perceived by our students, while they are students. For example, the college participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which measures how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from their college experience. The survey focuses on activities that previous studies have identified as "best practices" in undergraduate education, such as collaborative research with faculty members and outside-of-class learning activities. To put it another way, the survey measures the behaviors (of students and institutions) that are associated with the most effective teaching and learning practices.

Wheaton has scored so well on the NSSE that it was chosen as one of 20 colleges for a national study to explore how institutions can "add value" to students' educational experience. These are the results of the past, however. Wheaton cannot be satisfied with the successes of the past. Instead, we need to look ahead and challenge ourselves to further enhance the intellectual engagement of our students, as called for in the college's strategic plan. The results from the NSSE can offer clues about where to focus attention to achieve that goal. At bottom, this focus on constant improvement should be the primary purpose of assessment and accountability.

I couldn't begin to predict what accountability and assessment plan the commission will decide to recommend to the U.S. Department of Education. In the end, federal requirements may matter less than an institutional commitment to accountability: paying attention to what students can tell us about their college experience and constantly looking for ways to improve their learning. □

