

## Alumni Evaluation of a Whitman Education

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The HEDS alumni survey was conducted for the first time at Whitman College in the spring of 2006. Data were gathered from the classes of 1985, 1995 and 2000. The 246 respondents were spread somewhat evenly across the three classes, and the overall survey response rate was 38%. It should also be noted that the means acquired from this survey were fairly consistent across all of the compared graduating classes.

As part of the survey, alumni were asked to evaluate their undergraduate education. In doing so they indicated the importance in their current personal and professional lives of different abilities and types of knowledge that may be developed at an undergraduate institution, as well as the extent to which their undergraduate experience enhanced those abilities or types of knowledge. In other words, is the college teaching abilities and types of knowledge that alumni now find valuable? Both of these items (“Importance in current activities” and “Extent enhanced by undergraduate experience”) were measured on a scale of 1 = Not at All, 2 = A Little, 3 = Moderately, 4 = Greatly. Table 1 displays the mean scores for both the level of importance in current activities and the amount of enhancement in each area.

**Table 1: Evaluation of Undergraduate Education**

<b>Abilities and Types of Knowledge</b>	<b>Importance</b>	<b>Enhance</b>
Think analytically and logically	3.94	3.82
Function independently	3.91	3.59
Communicate well orally	3.90	3.50
Acquire new skills and knowledge	3.85	3.73
Understand others	3.82	3.42
Establish a course of action	3.81	3.41
Write effectively	3.80	3.80
Formulate creative/original ideas	3.76	3.59
Develop desire for continued learning	3.75	3.71
Intellectual self-confidence	3.72	3.54
Function effectively as member of a team	3.66	3.20
Understand moral/ethical issues	3.60	3.31
Relate to people of different cultures/races	3.59	2.96
Place current problems in perspective	3.56	3.34
Understand myself	3.55	3.42
Lead and supervise tasks and groups	3.52	3.07
Gain in-depth knowledge of a field	3.50	3.42
Develop self-esteem	3.49	3.35
Develop awareness of societal problems	3.38	3.28
Academic ability	3.36	3.65
Use technology	3.35	2.78
Use quantitative tools	3.34	3.19
Appreciate arts	3.15	3.46
Understand the process of science	2.99	3.02
Read or speak a foreign language	2.44	2.49

Not surprisingly, alumni indicated with a mean score of 3.82 that Whitman excelled at enhancing their ability to “think analytically and logically”, as well as successfully improving their skills for “writing effectively” (3.80), “acquiring new skills and knowledge” (3.73) and increasing the “desire for continued learning” (3.71). Despite high means in many abilities and types of knowledge, there were still some areas in which alumni indicated that Whitman could improve. For example, being able to “relate well to people of different cultures and races” received a mean rating of only 2.96 when asked whether this ability was enhanced at Whitman. The ability to “use technology” also received a low mean score of 2.78. Given the high availability of electronic resources on campus, the lack of enhancement in this area is surprising. One possibility is that alumni entered into Whitman already capable of using technology, consequently making improvement more difficult.

An important comparison with these numbers is the difference between what was reported as currently important and what was enhanced by a Whitman education. Is Whitman providing its students with the tools they need to be successful after graduation? While most items had similar mean scores for “importance” and “enhanced,” eight items stand out as having much more current importance than being enhanced by the Whitman experience.

**Table 2**

Area	Importance	Enhance	Difference
Relate well to people of different cultures/races	3.59	2.96	0.63
Use technology	3.35	2.78	0.57
Function effectively as a member of a team	3.66	3.20	0.46
Lead and supervise tasks and groups	3.52	3.07	0.45
Communicate well orally	3.90	3.50	0.40
Understand others	3.82	3.42	0.40
Establish a course of action	3.81	3.41	0.40
Function independently	3.91	3.59	0.32

While the difference between “importance” and “enhanced” is interesting, it is also important to explore the overlap for individuals. Are the same individuals ranking each area low and high? Or is there a significant number of alumni saying an area currently having “great” importance was not enhanced by their Whitman College experience? Crosstabulations of these pairs of items show four items with a greater number of “High Importance – Low Enhanced” responses: use technology, relate well to people of different cultures and races, lead and supervise groups, and function as a team member (see Table 3). Table 3 shows the percent of respondents who said the item was “moderately” or “greatly” in their current lives, but was enhanced “not at all” or “a little.”

**Table 3**

Ability	Moderately to Greatly Important + Enhanced Not At All to A Little
Use technology	29.0%
Relate well to people of different cultures/races	26.5%
Lead and supervise groups	20.9%

These items represent areas where Whitman can strive for improvement. For the other items in the list, the “High Importance – Low Enhancement” percentage was below 15%, and below 10% for most items. Since alumni indicated that these abilities are currently valuable and important in their lives, Whitman should enable and encourage growth in these areas in order to increase success after graduation. Overall, alumni reported that Whitman enhanced many abilities that they still find useful, such as being able to think analytically and logically, acquiring new skills and being able to write effectively, but it was also reported that Whitman needs to improve in other areas of equal importance, such as being able to relate well to people from different backgrounds.