

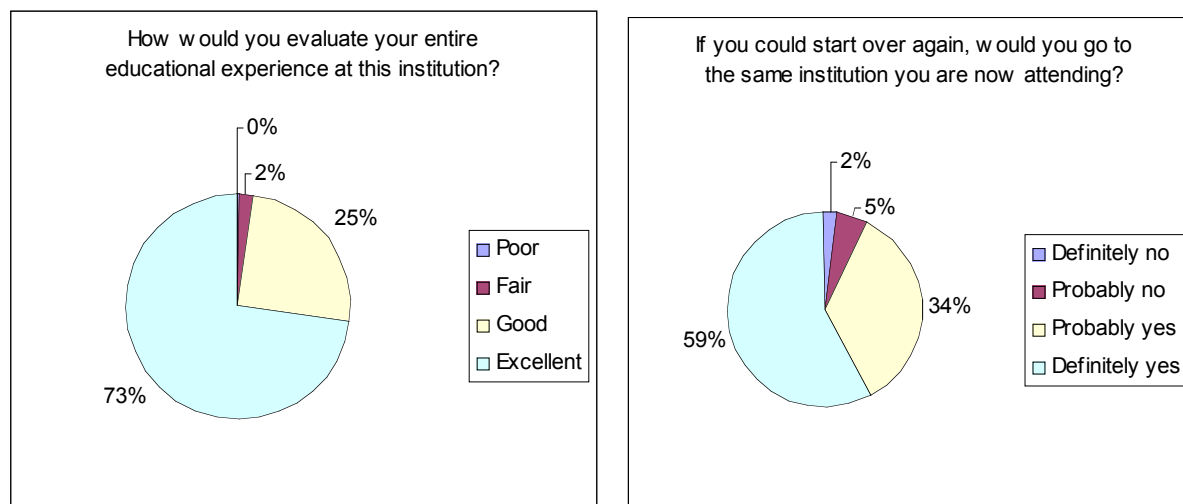
NSSE Report #3: What Affects Student Satisfaction?

Neal Christopherson, Office of Institutional Research
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Student satisfaction is an important issue for college administrators. What makes students more or less satisfied with their institution? Studies have shown that important concerns such as retention and graduation rates are influenced by satisfaction. In addition, it is likely that such diverse issues as alumni giving, comments to college guidebooks, and informal recommendations to high school students are related to general student satisfaction. In effect, levels of satisfaction among the student body provide a sort of “report card” for how the school is doing as a whole.

The National Survey of Student Engagement, administered to the Whitman College student body during the Spring of 2001¹, measures student satisfaction using two basic questions: 1) “How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?” and 2) “If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?” As **Figure 1** demonstrates, Whitman students tend to be very satisfied with their college experience. Nearly 98% rate their experience as “good” or “excellent” (with nearly 73% marking “excellent”). Similarly, over 92% say that they would “probably” or “definitely” attend Whitman again (with nearly 60% marking “definitely”). Whitman’s mean scores on these two items are significantly higher than those of other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges.

Figure 1: Student Satisfaction at Whitman College



¹ About 875 Whitman students of all class levels were sampled, and about 60% of those sampled returned a completed survey (N = 522)

Students are satisfied with their Whitman education not by simply arriving on campus and attending classes, but rather because of specific aspects of campus life. Knowing what impacts student satisfaction can help the college decide where to focus its future efforts. For this analysis, an overall satisfaction measure was created by combining the scores of the two items in Figure 1.

Table 1 shows the largest correlates with student satisfaction. This list has two basic themes. First, issues involving relationships with other students and faculty are very important: the students' perceived quality of relationships, academic advising, and perceptions of the extent to which the college provides support to students in their academic and social lives. Second, the extent to which students felt their Whitman experience contributed to their development in certain areas: acquiring a broad general education, thinking critically and analytically, working effectively with others, understanding yourself, and writing clearly and effectively. *It is important to note that Whitman scores significantly better than other liberal arts institutions on all of these items except quality of advising and contributed to working effectively with others.*

Table 1: Largest Correlates with Satisfaction

Item	Correlation with Satisfaction
Quality of relationships with other students	0.502
Quality of relationships with faculty members	0.427
Contributed to: Acquiring a broad general education	0.413
Contributed to: Thinking critically and analytically	0.412
Emphasize: Providing the support you need to thrive socially	0.374
Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices	0.368
Emphasize: Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically	0.365
The quality of academic advising you have received at your institution	0.341
Contributed to: Working effectively with others	0.339
Contributed to: Understanding yourself	0.330
Contributed to: Writing clearly and effectively	0.325

Similarly, it is important to know which issues are not highly correlated with satisfaction. **Table 2** shows those items that have a correlation with the satisfaction measure between .05 and -.05. Surprisingly, one of the items on this list is the amount of time spent participating in co-curricular activities, which is often thought to be highly correlated with satisfaction. It is possible that participating in co-curricular activities influences other things, which in turn affect satisfaction.

Table 2: Lowest Correlates with Satisfaction

Item	Correlation with Satisfaction
Emphasize: Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work	0.048
Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages	0.045
Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more	0.033
Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in	0.032
Relaxing and socializing (watching TV, partying, exercising, playing computer and other games, etc.)	0.027
Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings	0.011
Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, social fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.)	0.006
Providing care for dependents living with you (parents, children, spouse, etc.)	-0.019
Working for pay off campus	-0.042
Worked with other students on projects during class	-0.047

Plotting the correlations with overall satisfaction against mean scores produces a helpful matrix that shows whether or not we are doing well in the right areas. This analysis focuses on two main areas: student experiences and educational growth.

Section 8 of the NSSE asks students to report the extent to which their experience at Whitman contributed to their “knowledge, skills, and personal development” in certain areas. Whitman is better at developing some areas than others, and some areas have a greater impact on satisfaction than do others. **Table 3** provides a summary of this analysis. Items in Category A are important areas where we do well. Items in Category B are important areas where we do well, but should consider improving. Items in Category C are areas where we do not do well, but should consider improving. Items in Category D can be considered less important at this time, as they are not highly correlated with satisfaction. The complete data and scatterplot is attached at the end of this document.

Table 3: Areas of knowledge, growth, and personal development

Category	Notes
<p>A. Areas where Whitman is <i>strong</i> and has a <i>high</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acquiring a broad general education 2. Thinking critically and analytically 3. Understanding yourself 4. Writing clearly and effectively 5. Learning effectively on your own 	<p>Compared to other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, Whitman scores significantly better on #1-4.</p> <p>All except #5 are on the “highest correlates with satisfaction” list in Table 1.</p>
<p>B. Areas where Whitman is <i>average</i> and has a <i>high</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working effectively with others 2. Speaking clearly and effectively 3. Developing a personal code of values and ethics 	<p>#1 and 2 are much more highly correlated with satisfaction than #3.</p> <p>#1 is on the “highest correlates with satisfaction” list in Table 1.</p>
<p>C. Areas where Whitman is <i>weak</i> and has a <i>high</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving the welfare of your community 2. Understanding people of other backgrounds 3. Acquiring job/work skills 4. Voting in state, local, and national elections 	<p>Compared to other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, Whitman scores significantly <i>better</i> on #1.</p> <p>Compared to other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, Whitman scores significantly <i>worse</i> on #2-4.</p> <p>For these items, the correlations with satisfaction are all lower than those in category A.</p>
<p>D. Areas where Whitman is <i>weak</i> and has a <i>low</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using computing information and technology 2. Analyzing quantitative problems 	<p>Compared to other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, Whitman scores significantly <i>worse</i> on #1.</p> <p>These items have the lowest correlates with satisfaction when compared to other areas of knowledge, skill, and personal development.</p>

Section 1 of the NSSE asks about the frequency of different experiences and activities students have during the academic year. These items are more specific, and do not have as high correlations with satisfaction as the items in Table 3. However, the same kind of analysis can be conducted. **Table 4** shows which items fall into each of four categories. Again, a complete list of means and correlations is attached, as is the scatterplot for these items. Category A contains important areas where we do well. Items in Category B are areas where we do well, but should consider improving. Items in Category C are areas where we do not do well, but should consider improving. Items in Category D can be considered less important in terms of promoting student satisfaction.

Table 4: Academic, Intellectual, and Social Experiences

Category	Notes
<p>A. Areas where Whitman is <i>strong</i> and has a <i>high</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussed ideas with others outside of class. 2. Received prompt feedback from faculty. 3. Contributed to class discussions. 4. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor. 5. Had serious conversations with students who differ from you in terms of religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values. 6. Used email to communicate with an instructor. 	<p>Of all academic, intellectual, and social experiences, #1 is far and away the strongest correlate with satisfaction.</p> <p>Compared to other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, Whitman scores significantly <i>better</i> on #1, 4-6.</p>
<p>B. Areas where Whitman is <i>average</i> and has a <i>high</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Worked harder than you thought 2. Had serious conversations with students of a different race 3. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments. 4. Used an electronic medium to discuss or complete assignments 	<p>#4 has a much lower correlation with satisfaction than #1-3.</p>
<p>C. Areas where Whitman is <i>weak</i> and has a <i>high</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussed ideas with faculty outside of class 2. Worked with faculty on assignments other than coursework. 3. Talked about career plans with advisor 4. Made a class presentation 	<p>Of all academic, intellectual, and social experiences, #1 has the third-highest correlation with satisfaction.</p> <p>Compared to other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, Whitman scores significantly <i>lower</i> on #4.</p>
<p>D. Areas where Whitman is <i>weak</i> and has a <i>low</i> correlation with satisfaction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tutored or taught other students. 2. Participated in a community-based project as part of a course. 3. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper before turning it in. 4. Worked with other students on projects during class. 5. Came to class without completing readings or assignments. 	<p>Compared to other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, Whitman scores significantly <i>lower</i> on #2 and #4.</p> <p>#3 and #4 are on the “lowest correlates with satisfaction” list in Table 2.</p>

Overall, Tables 3 and 4 provide suggestions for how to improve satisfaction. Continuing to maintain and improve the items in Category A is very important. Also, items in Categories B and C are areas to target. Some specifically require faculty involvement, others are more general in nature. The purpose of this report is not to provide policy, but rather to suggest directions for future policy changes. Looking at these tables, is Whitman achieving its stated goals? Student satisfaction is an important variable that ultimately impacts many areas of the college, and it is important to constantly work to improve it. In general it is important that we continue to cultivate relationships between students, and between students and faculty/administrators, and to provide a healthy community of support for students both socially and academically.