

NSEE Report #2: What do Students Learn While at Whitman College?

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April, 2007

While we can tout the merits of a “Whitman education,” what exactly do students feel they are learning while at Whitman College? In the spring of 2005, Whitman participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which asked questions about how the respondent’s “experience at [Whitman] contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development.” 445 First-Year and Senior Whitman students were sampled, and about 55% of those sampled returned a completed survey (N = 243). Analyzing these survey responses, especially those of seniors, gives a good picture of what a Whitman education entails.

Table 1 shows the individual items and overall mean scores from this section of the survey, ranked from highest to lowest. Respondents were asked the extent to which each experience at Whitman contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in each area. Response choices were 1 = Very Little, 2 = Some, 3 = Quite a bit, 4 = Very Much. The top 5 areas are: thinking critically and analytically, acquiring a broad general education, writing clearly and effectively, learning effectively on your own, and understanding yourself.

Table 1: Overall Means for Areas of Educational and Personal Growth

Education and Personal Growth	Mean Score
Thinking critically and analytically	3.70
Acquiring a broad general education	3.65
Writing clearly and effectively	3.50
Learning effectively on your own	3.25
Understanding yourself	3.19
Speaking clearly and effectively	3.11
Working effectively with others	3.03
Analyzing quantitative problems	2.80
Developing a personal code of values and ethics	2.80
Voting in local, state, or national elections	2.73
Using computing and information technology	2.63
Solving complex real-world problems	2.60
Contributing to the welfare of your community	2.57
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	2.54
Acquiring a job or work-related knowledge and skills	2.31
Developing a deepened sense of spirituality	1.65

Scale: 1 = Very Little, 2 = Some, 3 = Quite a bit, 4 = Very Much

Like any learning experience, the Whitman experience changes from the first year to the fourth. This development is reflected in the differing responses of Seniors and First Year students to these items. **Table 2** shows the mean for Seniors, First Year students, and their mean difference, ranked in order of highest to lowest mean difference. The largest changes are in the following areas: speaking clearly and effectively, learning effectively on your own, and working effectively with others. Improvement in these areas is not surprising, for as students continue their education they are presented with more opportunities to engage in each of these activities.

Table 2: Mean Differences between First-Year Students and Seniors in Areas of Educational and Personal Growth

Education and Personal Growth	FY	Seniors	Mean Difference
Speaking clearly and effectively	2.94	3.30	0.36*
Learning effectively on your own	3.09	3.42	0.33*
Working effectively with others	2.91	3.17	0.26*
Using computing and information technology	2.51	2.75	0.24*
Understanding yourself	3.09	3.30	0.21
Developing a personal code of values and ethics	2.70	2.90	0.20
Thinking critically and analytically	3.64	3.78	0.14*
Writing clearly and effectively	3.45	3.57	0.12
Developing a deepened sense of spirituality	1.60	1.72	0.12
Acquiring a broad general education	3.61	3.71	0.10
Contributing to the welfare of your community	2.56	2.58	0.02
Analyzing quantitative problems	2.80	2.80	0.0
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic	2.54	2.54	0.0
Solving complex real-world problems	2.64	2.56	-0.08
Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills	2.39	2.23	-0.16
Voting in local, state, or national elections	2.88	2.57	-0.31*

Scale: 1 = Very Little, 2 = Some, 3 = Quite a bit, 4 = Very Much

* Means significantly different at $p < .05$

Are these changes the product of the Whitman experience, or do they simply reflect growth experienced by most college students at all liberal arts institutions? **Table 3** provides a comparison of First Year and Senior differences between Whitman and the other baccalaureate liberal arts colleges that participated in the NSSE. In terms of how much the college experience affected certain areas of personal development, the difference between first year students and seniors at Whitman is greater than the difference at other liberal arts colleges for 6 of the 16 items and lower for the remaining 10. However, in many of the areas where the difference between Whitman first years and seniors is lower than other schools, Whitman students still score higher than their counterparts. For example, the overall differences for thinking critically

and analytically were lower, but Whitman first year and senior students scored much higher than first year and senior students at other schools¹. The largest positive difference between Whitman and other schools are in the areas of developing a deepened sense of spirituality and learning effectively on your own. The largest negative differences are in the areas of acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills, solving complex real-world problems, analyzing quantitative problems, and acquiring a broad general education. However, it is important to note that for acquiring a broad general education, Whitman’s first year and senior students score much higher than their counterparts.

Table 3: Comparison of First Year and Senior mean differences between Whitman and the other Baccalaureate Liberal Arts Colleges

	Other Liberal		
	Whitman	Arts	Difference
Acquiring a broad general education	0.10	0.21	-0.11
Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills	-0.16	0.19	-0.35
Writing clearly and effectively	0.12	0.21	-0.09
Speaking clearly and effectively	0.36	0.35	0.01
Thinking critically and analytically	0.14	0.23	-0.09
Analyzing quantitative problems	0.0	0.15	-0.15
Using computing and information technology	0.24	0.21	0.03
Working effectively with others	0.26	0.25	0.01
Voting in local, state, or national elections	-0.31	-0.11	-0.2
Learning effectively on your own	0.33	0.2	0.13
Understanding yourself	0.21	0.22	-0.01
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic	0.0	0.02	-0.02
Solving complex real-world problems	-0.08	0.13	-0.21
Developing a personal code of values and ethics	0.20	0.14	0.06
Contributing to the welfare of your community	0.02	0.1	-0.08
Developing a deepened sense of spirituality	0.12	-0.09	0.21

Scale: 1 = Very Little, 2 = Some, 3 = Quite a bit, 4 = Very Much

Overall, these survey results show that Whitman College students experience growth in several important areas that any college should strive towards. However, there are equally important areas where students indicated less improvement than their peers at other schools. Several questions arise at this point. Are these areas of personal and educational growth consistent with the college’s overall mission? Are there other areas that should improve as students progress through the Whitman curriculum? To what extent is this growth the result of

¹ See “NSSE Report #1” for more details on these differences

Whitman's efforts and to what extent is it the result of student motivation? Answers to these questions cannot be obtained from these data, and other studies must be completed before any useful answers can be found.