A PLAN FOR ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT ACADEMIC LEARNING

Carleton College
Northfield, Minnesota 55057

Submitted by the Faculty of Carleton College
to the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

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1. The Mission of Carleton College

The plan for assessing student academic achievement at Carleton College is based upon Carleton's long-standing purpose of providing a strong liberal arts education to its students. Carleton's interpretation of the nature of this education is described in the opening pages of the college's catalog in a section titled "The Purpose of the College":

Carleton College strives to provide a liberal education of the highest quality. The goal of such an education is to liberate individuals from the constraints imposed by ignorance or complacency and equip them broadly to lead rewarding, creative, and useful lives.

At its simplest, a liberal education teaches the basic skills upon which all higher achievements rest: to read perceptively, to write and speak clearly, and to think analytically. Carleton draws upon these skills to foster a critical appreciation of our intellectual, aesthetic, and moral heritage and to
encourage original thought. A Carleton student not only masters certain information and techniques, but also acquires a sense of curiosity and intellectual adventure, an awareness of method and purpose in a variety of fields, and an affinity for quality and integrity wherever they may be found. Nurtured by dedicated teachers in an environment that rewards growth and questioning, these values prepare students, as Carleton trustee Martin Trow has written, to “accomplish large and important things in the world, make important discoveries, lead great institutions, influence their nation’s laws and government, and add substantially to knowledge.” But above all, they prepare one to lead a fully realized life in a diverse and changing world.

To this end, Carleton’s curriculum balances a traditional emphasis upon classic fields of study, or disciplines, with a complementary offering of distribution courses, electives, and interdisciplinary programs. The disciplines provide rigor and depth of training, and opportunity to test oneself against a body of knowledge and a repertory of skills that educated women and men have built, over time, into major structures of intellectual inquiry. Interdisciplinary programs not only encourage the application of these skills to questions too complex and subtle to be approached through any one discipline, but also reflect the open-textured, dynamic character of the disciplines themselves.

In addition, the college requires that all students, to prepare themselves for lifelong growth and continuing education, must distribute their courses among four divisions of knowledge, take at least one course centrally concerned with another culture, and demonstrate proficiency in English composition and in a second language. For those seeking a still more varied experience, it offers a wide range of opportunities for off-campus study, many of these in foreign countries. Faculty and students alike participate actively in the creative and performing arts and athletics, both of which are integral parts of a Carleton education.

Education, although a profoundly individual experience, prepares one to live fruitfully in society and contribute to its work. The liberal arts at Carleton aim to liberate as fully as possible the whole potential of each student and open the way toward a generous and interesting life.

2. College-wide Goals for Student Academic Achievement

The principles of diversity and freedom are deeply rooted at Carleton College. Although our graduation requirements are fairly comprehensive, students may satisfy them through an unusually rich and varied set of choices. The following list of goals for student academic achievement is based on the mission statement and graduation requirements of the college, on the discussion of the mission included in the self-study document from Carleton’s most recent reaccreditation review (1988), on a discussion document of the Education and Curriculum
Committee (ECC) entitled "Liberal Arts Goals at Carleton" (1994), and on numerous meetings with members of the faculty during 1994-95.

Carleton College aims to

1 foster students' ability to read perceptively and critically at an advanced level;

2 help students develop their ability to speak and write effectively in English;

3 help students learn a second language;

4 help students attain proficiency in a discipline or field of knowledge;

5 encourage students to become acquainted with method and purpose in a variety of learning areas: in the humanities, in literature and the arts, in the social sciences, and in mathematics and the natural sciences;

6 foster students' ability to think analytically and synthetically and to bring their knowledge to bear in addressing complex problems in a discipline;

7 encourage students to acquire an awareness of cultural diversity;

8 help students develop basic skills of contributing as members of work groups or teams;

9 make it possible for students to avail themselves of a variety of other cultural, service, recreational, and intellectual opportunities.

... foster students' ability to read perceptively and critically at an advanced level

Carleton has no "reading requirement" as such, but advanced skills of reading are critically important for student achievement in almost every course. Elements of these skills are practiced in basic and advanced courses in every department. Our concern that students read perceptively and critically begins early, through our Common Reading and related discussions for all first-year students during orientation week. Although this program is primarily intended to engage students at an early stage in discussions of issues of difference and diversity, careful reading of the text is an essential element of the process. We also offer special programs for students who are identified by advisors or instructors, or self-identify, as having reading difficulties; these include skills workshops, tutoring services, and an English as a Second Language (ESL) class through the Office of Academic Support Services.
2 ... help students develop their ability to speak and write effectively in English

Carleton has always had a writing requirement. Clear expository writing is an important skill for coursework throughout the college, from English to Mathematics and Computer Science. As a result of a review of the Writing Program we are in the midst of a discussion about finding new ways to implement the writing requirement. The proposed change currently under discussion would entail students' completing not just one elementary course but several courses that had been designated "writing-intensive."

We have no graduation requirement pertaining to students' ability to make oral presentations before audiences and are not likely to add one; but there is widespread agreement that we need to pay more attention to this skill. Most research seminars and senior integrative exercises ("comps") in many departments currently incorporate oral presentations, so we already have a large body of experience on which to draw. In recent years the English Department has added a course on oral presentation; there will be four sections offered next year. We also have an active program in Theater Studies that includes courses in acting. The next step is to make sure that opportunities and some coaching are widely available throughout the curriculum so that no student will miss them entirely. Over the next few years, we will proceed by encouraging the faculty to incorporate oral presentation elements into courses, by offering mini-workshops through the Learning and Teaching Center, and by disseminating information about methods used successfully in some departments so that others can emulate them.

3 ... help students learn a second language

"The goal of Carleton's language requirement is the learning of a second language in addition to one's native tongue" [Catalog, 1994-95, p. 10]. Carleton offers instruction in German, Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Marathi (occasionally), Latin, and Greek. The college maintains a state-of-the-art language lab and off-campus language seminars in Mexico, France, and Germany/Austria. Carleton-affiliated consortial programs in Russia, China, Japan, and India provide additional opportunities for our students to learn foreign languages within the context of the host country.

Students pass the language requirement by 1) presenting a score of 650 on the College Board Achievement Test in the language or a score of 4 on the Advanced Placement test in the language; 2) passing the fourth-level course in the language (fifth-level for Japanese and Chinese) at Carleton with a grade of C-minus or higher; 3) passing a placement test at the college; or 4) in the case of languages not taught at the college, demonstrating proficiency in some other way. A small percentage of students—with demonstrated learning disabilities—are exempted from the requirement. Many students aim for a degree of skill in

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1 The required senior integrative exercise in the major field is known informally as "comps" from its old name, "senior comprehensive examination".
the language exceeding that required to pass the requirement by taking advanced courses, reading and doing research in foreign-language sources, and traveling and studying abroad; these students may be awarded a Certificate of Advanced Study in Foreign Language.

4 ... help students attain proficiency in a discipline or field of knowledge

Carleton expects its students to master the depth and rigors of a particular field of enquiry or body of knowledge. Thus, each student must choose a major field of study and must focus on the knowledge and techniques of enquiry of that discipline. Currently, Carleton offers twenty-seven departmentally-based majors and six interdisciplinary majors. Students may also create special majors by petition. "Proficiency," as used here, means college-level proficiency as judged by the faculty trained in each discipline. Periodic, formal departmental reviews, including an external component, provide a rigorous check on our majors.

5 ... encourage students to become acquainted with method and purpose in several fields in the humanities, literature and the arts, the social sciences, and mathematics and the natural sciences

In order to expose our students to the breadth of human knowledge and foster a sense of respect for the variety of ways of knowing, to encourage them to read and to think critically, and to arouse in students a sense of intellectual curiosity, Carleton requires all students to satisfy an extensive distribution requirement consisting of two courses in arts and literature, two courses in the humanities, three courses in the social sciences, and three courses in the natural sciences and mathematics.

Many students also supplement and strengthen the work in their majors by completing one of our many concentrations, which are interdisciplinary programs such as Asian Studies or Environmental & Technology Studies. Some special majors, such as Women's Studies and Biochemistry, are interdisciplinary in nature.

6 ... foster students' ability to think analytically and synthetically and to bring their knowledge to bear in addressing complex problems in a discipline

Analysis (taking things apart) and synthesis (putting things together) are commonly understood to be complementary intellectual maneuvers. The senior integrative exercise ("comps") is a capstone experience in the student's major field that requires him or her to make use of these higher order thinking skills. The shape of the exercise varies from department to department, but in every case departments require the student to synthesize material from the field and often from neighboring fields as well. In many cases, the integrative exercise enables the student to conduct original research.
Many courses, majors, and concentrations also give students instruction and experience in analytical thinking. Seeing issues in larger context is emphasized in the senior integrative exercises and through the concentrations program, as well as through the content of many courses.

7 . . . encourage students to acquire an awareness of cultural diversity

In 1989, Carleton added a graduation requirement known as the Recognition and Affirmation of Difference (RAD) requirement and in 1994 the faculty approved a document on "Multicultural Goals for the Curriculum." The scope of terms such as "difference" and "cultural diversity" and the term "RAD" itself were discussed and reaffirmed in the ECC during this past year. Students currently complete the requirement by taking at least one course certified as centrally addressing diversity issues in a country, tradition, or art from outside Europe or the United States, or with issues or theories of gender, class, race, or ethnicity as they may be found anywhere in the world. Such courses are found in many departments and at all levels from introductory to advanced.

8 . . . help students develop basic skills of contributing as members of work groups or teams

This goal follows from the language in our mission statement about preparing students for the workplace and for democratic participation in American society. Carleton offers students many opportunities to work in groups, notably in science labs, class projects, and group research projects, in musical ensembles, through team sports, through student government and the many committees and task forces of our campus governance system, through volunteer activities, such as tutoring in the Northfield community, that are organized by the ACT (Acting in the Community Together) program, and through part-time employment on campus in the kitchens and dining rooms, the grounds crew, the library, and department offices.

9 . . . make it possible for students to avail themselves of a variety of other cultural, service, recreational, and intellectual opportunities

Through its curriculum and in other ways, Carleton offers its students opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge in a variety of additional learning areas that are likely to prove important and satisfying to them in later life. Students have opportunities, for instance, to develop an appreciation of the creative and performing arts and to participate in the arts; to gain a critical appreciation of the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral heritage of American and European civilization as well as to travel worldwide and encounter societies other than their own, in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America; to gain a basic understanding of the role of technology in society and the nature of technological change; to develop computer skills; to improve their skills at a variety of team and individual sports and physical activities; and to develop their capacities for active participation in the life of a democratic community. This list is not exhaustive but illustrative.
3. Some Distinctive Features of Carleton's Culture

Like any organization marked by considerable continuity of membership and intense face-to-face interactions among members, Carleton College has a distinctive—though by no means static—organizational culture. Our campus community places high value on intellectual achievement and strives for a culture of excellence. Thus, the Carleton assessment plan builds on arrangements already in place at the college. We are encouraged in this strategy by several of the NCA's own recommendations: that an assessment plan be a natural outgrowth of the mission of the college; that it be cost-effective and employ the most efficient means possible in demonstrating that the educational mission is being fulfilled; and that the plan avoid inhibiting other important features or goals of the college such as its commitment to diversity and academic excellence.

In this section we briefly identify features of the Carleton culture that have a bearing on our plan to assess student academic achievement.

**Widespread participation, open discussion, a participatory governance system.** The institutional culture at Carleton emphasizes open discussion and the participation of many groups—students, junior and senior faculty, and often other employees—of the college—in decision-making.

For example, important and highly charged matters, such as financial aid policy, are openly debated in the College Council, a body that includes senior administrators, alumni, and trustee representatives as well as elected representatives of the faculty, student body, and staff. Before making their way to the Council, many policy questions are investigated and discussed in one of two governance committees: matters involving student life and student services in the Committee on Student Life, the annual budget and long-range financial planning in the Budget Committee. Matters of educational policy move first through the Education & Curriculum Committee and then on to the faculty. The meetings of all these committees, with the exception of faculty meetings, are open to the entire community; minutes are widely circulated. As with the College Council, the three governance committees include elected representatives of the student body and the faculty.

**Departmental cultures vary, but Carleton’s faculty generally handle departmental decisions through discussion and consensus-building with full participation of junior members.** Each department also has a student-faculty curriculum committee that reviews plans for new courses, proposed changes in major requirements, and the like. Student opinions are sought whenever

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candidates for teaching positions visit the campus and in the third-year and tenure reviews of junior faculty members.

Practices of consultation and discussion such as these generally ensure that decisions have widespread support or at least understanding on the campus, although considerable time is often needed to forge a broad base of support for a significant college-wide change.

Respect for student autonomy. In a variety of ways, Carleton tries to demonstrate institutional confidence in the individual student's capacity to make mature choices. The college states requirements in general terms and offers the student a number of different ways by which he or she may fulfill those requirements. We rely on our system of faculty advisors to help students make program decisions. The college also offers its students a great variety of cultural and intellectual opportunities but trusts the student to choose among them.

Because we respect students' ideas and aspirations, we are quite comfortable with assessing student academic achievement, in part, by discussing educational outcomes with students themselves. Our assessment plan includes a number of ways for doing so.

Trust in faculty. The same principle applies to members of the faculty. In their teaching and the ordinary planning and administrative work of the departments, faculty members are accorded a great deal of autonomy. Organized into departments and interdisciplinary programs, they decide what courses they will offer, what material they will cover, and how they will teach. They set the major requirements and examine students at the end of the senior year.

Though students play a significant role in searches and tenure reviews and senior administrators are intensely involved, the judgment of faculty in the departments remains the single most important factor in deciding who will be a member of the community of scholar-teachers at Carleton. Through third-year and tenure reviews, faculty members are evaluated with respect to their effectiveness as teachers and scholars and for their broader contributions to the college and the lives of its students. In their departments, faculty members informally but continually encourage one another to try new teaching techniques, to update and improve their courses, to give papers, and to publish.

Carleton is built on the belief that the faculty are able to maintain appropriate standards of excellence in both teaching and scholarship. The Carleton assessment plan assumes that in most respects the academic work of the college will remain decentralized. The plan relies heavily on the judgment of faculty members working in their departments.

Commitment to diversity. In 1964, Carleton made an institutional commitment to recruit, retain, and educate African-American students in significant numbers. Later the college extended this commitment to include members of other minority groups as well. The recognition gradually took hold that the goal of educating minority students necessarily entailed diversifying the faculty and
administration, enriching the curriculum in a variety of ways, and providing new services. A parallel effort with respect to women students, faculty, and administrators gathered momentum slightly later. With experience and the maturing of a national discussion of diversity in higher education, we have repeatedly re-thought the nature of the institutional commitment to diversity and will continue to do so.

4. Assessment at Carleton Today

As an institution, Carleton has customarily engaged in frequent and comprehensive self-assessment. Since its establishment in 1972, the Office of Institutional Research has gathered a huge array of data about the college and its programs from national surveys in which we participate, various alumni surveys, admissions surveys, compilations of information from offices around the college, and other sources. During the 1993-94 academic year, the Division of Student Affairs underwent a major review, including assessment by both an outside review committee and an internal committee of faculty, students, and staff. The Library was reviewed in 1991, the Off-Campus Studies program in 1987-88, and Academic Computing in 1992-93.

On the academic side, a system of regular and thorough reviews of all academic departments has been in place since 1970. A departmental review includes a thorough departmental self-study, a site visit and written report by reviewers from off campus (professors in the same field at liberal arts colleges and at research universities), and a report by an on-campus review team (professors from other departments and some students). Typically, two or three departments undergo a review each year, so that each department is reviewed every seven to ten years. Five years ago, we instituted similarly structured reviews for our interdisciplinary programs.

While we recognize that the purposes of these reviews do not exactly parallel the purposes of a program for assessment of student academic achievement, our point is that Carleton faculty members, students, and administrators have abundant experience with assessing the effectiveness of programs at the college.

Apart from formal reviews, faculty in departments and programs think and talk constantly about new areas of knowledge, new interests and demands from students, and what works well and not so well in their programs. Most faculty seek direct feedback on their teaching from students through course evaluations. Some elicit feedback about student learning regularly throughout the term in a variety of ways, including quizzes, short written exercises, homework, and e-mail discussions.

All regular faculty members receive a searching professional evaluation in the third and sixth years of their appointments at Carleton; these include evaluation questionnaires sent to students and graduates by the Dean of the College. Tenured faculty members may receive continuing feedback on their teaching through the Student Observer Program or the Senior Faculty Development
Program. Since its inception three years ago the Learning and Teaching Center (LTC) has developed into the focal point on campus for discussions among faculty about their teaching and student learning.

Each department has a student-dominated Department Curriculum Committee that is never shy about making suggestions for changes or additions to the department program. Each year, several departments hold departmental retreats with funding from the Dean's office. Often a retreat will result in changes in the department curriculum, whether in the content and format of introductory courses (Philosophy is a recent example), the organization of the required senior integrative exercise in the major (Political Science), or the structure and requirements for the major (African/African-American Studies).

Many of the examples discussed above pertain directly to the assessment of student academic achievement, though they generally have not been carried out as systematically as the NCA assessment guidelines seem to prefer. As we have worked to develop a more systematic plan for assessing student academic achievement, our goal has been to build on all that we already do at Carleton, to pick up and generalize good ideas from around the college, and to do more to "close the loop" with information already available to us.

Assessment in action at Carleton: two recent examples. Since beginning the regular review of academic departments in the early 1970s, Carleton has gradually expanded its review of academic programs to include non-departmental entities such as the Off-Campus Studies Office and the Concentrations program. The ECC also reviews graduation requirements on an occasional basis. Brief descriptions of two such reviews illustrate Carleton's current practice.

Case 1: Revising the College Writing Program. For two decades, Carleton has had a "writing across the curriculum" program through which many students are certified as competent in writing through work they do in regular courses around the college, not just specialized writing courses taught in the English Department. But there is widespread belief among the faculty that the quality of students' writing has deteriorated over a number of years—a documented national trend, not just a local one. The director of the College Writing Program also noted that the faculty members most heavily involved in the program tended to be senior people in the last decade of their careers, while few younger faculty members offered courses in fulfillment of the College Writing Requirement. At the present time there are two perceived issues with regard to student writing: the first is whether the quality of the writing itself is adequate and the second is the structure of the Writing Program.

The director convened a small task force (consisting of an associate dean of the college, the director of the Learning and Teaching Center, and the professor who serves as the liaison between the writing program and the English Department) to consider a revamping of the program. After several meetings with faculty and a review of the professional literature on teaching composition, the task force came up with two possible alternatives to the existing system for certifying
students as competent in writing. Further discussions suggested that the faculty would find one of these two new plans preferable to the other. The task force will make a presentation to the faculty and bring a formal proposal to the ECC in the fall of 1995.

Case 2: Do students gain adequate experience at making oral presentations? For a number of years, graduates of the college have persistently voiced the complaint, both informally and through alumni surveys, that they had enjoyed few opportunities and almost no help while at Carleton on giving talks and fielding questions before audiences. Staff of the Career Center confirm that Carleton students sometimes are disappointed in their performance in interviews for jobs, fellowships, and graduate programs. Through informal discussion, a consensus has developed that the college, principally through its academic program, ought to do something to afford students more opportunity to develop their speaking abilities. Departments are now addressing this problem in a variety of ways, including more opportunities for formal presentations in classes and oral presentation of comps results.

As these examples suggest, the college has many ways to sense when it is not doing a satisfactory job at some important educational task; and faculty and administrators, working together, can generally find ways to improve the situation. Once a consensus has emerged, most departments will make appropriate changes. However, the process is unsystematic. It can take a long time to make changes, and though some departments may make a major effort to respond to a recognized need, others may avoid doing so. In both cases presented above, more systematic assessment practices of the sort described below might have turned up signs of trouble much sooner and enabled the proponents of change to make a more persuasive case by providing considerable supporting evidence. A greater consciousness of our college-wide goals for student achievement might also have induced a more uniform response from departments.

Faculty participation in shaping this plan. We began to work on this assessment plan early in 1994, when the Dean of the College and the Faculty Affairs Committee appointed a committee consisting of six faculty members, three students, and an associate dean to investigate the assessment idea and develop a plan for Carleton. This "Committee on Assessment" met regularly and discussed Carleton's educational goals and existing means of assessment through the remainder of the 1993-94 academic year. During spring term 1994, departments submitted summaries of their current assessment practices and the ECC produced a document on our liberal arts goals.

In the fall of 1994, the committee prepared successive drafts of the assessment plan and solicited feedback from faculty members, senior administrators, and trustees. The committee also met with the ECC on several occasions to discuss specific parts of the plan. Through Carleton's faculty newsletter and the monthly meetings of the faculty, the Committee on Assessment has kept the community informed of specific features likely to be included in the plan and has requested input from faculty members. The committee has remained in close touch with

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academic departments; in January and February 1995, the co-chairs of the committee met with all departments to get critiques of a detailed working draft of the plan. Several open meetings gave faculty members additional opportunities to make suggestions and register concerns. A substantial number of faculty members have contributed ideas to the present plan. The faculty voted overwhelmingly to accept the plan on May 22, 1995.

5. Inventory of Likely Assessment Practices

At Carleton we will assess student academic achievement with respect to our stated goals in a variety of ways, bearing in mind that no single assessment practice is suitable for all learning goals. During the transition period (discussed below), we plan to try some new as well as familiar practices in order to decide which practices are best suited to various goals and departments. We expect that over time we will come to rely on some techniques while discarding others.

In making a selection of methods for assessing student academic learning, we have tried to adhere to the following principles:

- Build on the assessment practices already in use at Carleton.
- In recognition of the fact that departments approach their missions differently and have widely varying circumstances and customs, give faculty and departments significant latitude in developing effective assessment practices.
- Minimize the administrative burden of implementation and reporting for departments and the central academic administration.
- Don't bite off more than we can chew: focus on a few goals each year and save others for the next year.
- Involve students in the process, since their involvement not only contributes a valuable perspective to us but also furthers their own learning.
- Incorporate a variety of ways of measuring learning.
- Take advantage of the services that Carleton's Office of Institutional Research and Learning and Teaching Center can provide.
- Remember that we should approach assessment as an ongoing experiment and that all assessment practices will themselves eventually be assessed; thus, no practice is written in stone.
- Make sure the process is valuable to us and to our students!

In the following section we describe specific assessment techniques without connecting them to the goals for student academic achievement; later in the document we match these techniques to the goals.
A. Assessment activities centered in the Office of Institutional Research

The Office of Institutional Research, an administrative office that reports to the Dean for Budget and Planning, is thoroughly experienced in developing questionnaires, gathering information, and analyzing data about the college and similar institutions. Institutional Research also publishes reports for the faculty and administration that point out significant findings and trends at Carleton and elsewhere. In addition, the director of the office meets with committees and task forces, participates in the annual Faculty Retreat, and uses other means to disseminate information so that it is more likely to be put to use.

Carleton conducts a variety of surveys and gathers a range of data in order to assess the experience of Carleton students during, upon completion, and well after their time at Carleton. Some of the information gained is clearly relevant to the assessment of student academic achievement. Because many of our assessment practices are department-based, the Office of Institutional Research will play a key role in providing information on college-wide learning goals. The various surveys described below will be modified and supplemented with specific questions aimed at assessing these broader goals.

Surveys and data analysis of current students

Each year the college administers to entering first-year students the American Freshman Survey prepared by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA for the ACE. This survey probes the background, attitudes, and goals of entering students; it offers a baseline from which we can assess what happens to students in college. Participant institutions are allowed to include from ten to twenty questions of local interest, so Carleton is able to configure part of the survey to address its own learning goals. For example, we may elicit information about new students' high-school experience with and attitudes toward laboratory science, mathematics, and the performing arts. This baseline information can help us later to judge the effect of our programs and opportunities on these students. National norms for these data enable time-line comparisons and contrasts of Carleton students' responses with first-year students nationwide and those attending similar institutions.

Carleton is a member of the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) and administers the COFHE Senior Survey (which is offered every fifth year) to students at the end of their senior year. This survey provides an end-of-college look at student attitudes and goals comparable to the American Freshman Survey. It also asks seniors to evaluate a variety of programs and activities that they have experienced during college and to comment on their satisfaction with the skills and knowledge they acquired. For example, the COFHE survey asks seniors to comment on how their ability to write effectively, communicate well orally, acquire new skills and knowledge on their own, work independently without supervision, and synthesize ideas and information was "enhanced" by their college experience.
To fill in the gap from one COFHE Senior Survey to the next, Carleton employs the HEDS Senior Survey. This instrument is available annually from the Higher Education Data Sharing Group, a consortium of some sixty institutions of which Carleton is a member. The two surveys have considerable overlap. Both COFHE and HEDS also provide normative data for similar institutions, enabling comparison of Carleton's trends to those found elsewhere.

In even-numbered years, we administer the College Student Experience Questionnaire (commonly referred to as the "Robert Pace Survey") to a sample of students. This survey assesses students' use of campus resources, both human and physical: theater facilities, the library, computing facilities, and the like; it also provides data on students' relationships with other students and with faculty. In a sense, the Pace data give us insight into how engaged students are in specific aspects of the life of the institution. The Pace Survey also asks students about their experience with writing, science, textbooks, essay exams, and other core academic activities, and probes the frequency and nature of students' interactions with faculty beyond simply those experienced in the classroom.

Should we find our existing surveys inadequate in providing either the kinds of information we need to help us assess student learning, we are prepared, with the help of the Office of Institutional Research, to develop a questionnaire of our own. If such a questionnaire were designed it would be essential to formulate the questions carefully in order to address effectively the issues of interest to us and to conduct the survey in a systematic, campus-wide fashion. A possible model would be the letter currently sent to a large sample of students each faculty member being considered for tenure. This letter asks open-ended questions and invites the student to reply in a letter to the Dean of the College rather than by checking off items on a multiple-choice answer sheet. This survey format could prove useful when the college is seeking in-depth information about its effectiveness with respect to a particular goal.

Survey data are analyzed by the Office of Institutional Research, which will prepare summaries and analyses for the Dean of the College, the assessment coordinating group, and the ECC. While analyses of the data from these three surveys have in the past been distributed to senior administrators and occasionally to some faculty members, we will take steps to ensure that information deemed significant for the assessment of student academic achievement is regularly disseminated to faculty in usable form, perhaps through the faculty newsletter. Discussion will go forward in departments, at the annual Faculty Retreat, and in occasional workshops organized by the LTC.

With our new Datatel Colleague System of recording transcript data, the Office of Institutional Research and the Office of the Registrar can analyze enrollment patterns of students and recent graduates to determine the degree to which they explore various learning areas outside their majors, participate in off-campus programs, complete concentrations, etc.
Surveys of Carleton alums

COFHE has recently instituted a program of contacting alumni/alumnae who had taken the COFHE Senior Survey and administering a follow-up questionnaire five years, ten years, and possibly 15 years after graduation. As this survey grows into a standard element in our array of surveys, we will use the results to assess our efficacy with respect to appropriate learning goals. If the COFHE survey of alums fails to provide useful data in key areas, we will consider instituting a regular program of surveying alums two to five years after graduation through our own Office of Institutional Research, probably in cooperation with the Office of Alumni Affairs. Two years ago an all-alum survey produced a return of greater than 50 percent.

B. Assessment activities centered in departments and programs

Faculty members already assess student learning and the effectiveness of their own teaching methods in a variety of ways. Faculty members serve as academic advisors to students, read students' written work and observe their participation in class discussions, and often organize and carry out classroom activities explicitly intended to assess whether students are effectively using the knowledge and techniques taught in the course. The Learning and Teaching Center has conducted workshops on classroom assessment. At the level of individual courses, student learning assessment ultimately results in the grade earned by the student. We recognize that course grades are not considered appropriate as indicators of student academic learning in the context of this assessment plan. However, we do wish to stress that the faculty consider grades to be at the heart of their constant attempt to evaluate what students have learned. The assessment plan essentially asks faculty members to go beyond assessment at the level of the course or the departmental program and to assist with assessing student achievement with respect to college-wide goals.

The senior integrative exercise and the departmental annual report

The integrative exercise ("comps") is the capstone experience for seniors in their majors. The exact nature of comps varies from one department to another, but all comps provide some sort of occasion for seniors to integrate their work in the major and to display their knowledge and skills in writing and (often) through a public presentation of some sort. Typically, a senior will write a research thesis and defend it in an oral examination or give a public talk on a research problem in the field; in some departments, seniors take a comprehensive written examination.

Each year, after all senior integrative exercises in a department have been completed, faculty in each department hold a departmental assessment meeting to review the over-all results and identify specific areas where students in the major appear to be meeting expectations or to be falling short. This practice will rather easily be integrated into the assessment program, simply by asking members of each department to give particularly thorough consideration to goals on which the college is concentrating that year. One way for departments
to obtain specific information from their seniors would be to ask them to complete a questionnaire addressing specific learning issues. The results could serve to focus faculty discussion. In the departmental annual report a few weeks later, the department chair will report to the Dean about student learning in 1) the major, particularly as reflected in comps, and 2) courses offered to non-majors, with special emphasis on learning goals on which the college is concentrating that year. If it seems appropriate, the chair may outline steps that the department will take to address problem areas that department members find troubling.

Although concentrations are not majors and students participating in them do not complete a concentration comps project, the learning that goes on in concentrations represents some of the most effective ways we have of encouraging students to think broadly and integratively. In their annual reports to the Dean of the College, therefore, concentration directors will be asked to respond to the same questions on assessment as department chairs.

**Periodic reviews of academic departments and programs**

Since 1970 Carleton has conducted a searching review, involving both internal and external review committees, of each academic department every seven to ten years. The broad purpose of the review is to provide an opportunity for the department to refocus its energies by asking what the proper role of the department is in the college and how well it is fulfilling that role. More recently, Carleton began to review concentrations, academic support programs such as Off-Campus Studies, and administrative offices.

While these reviews occur too infrequently to serve as the mainstay of an assessment program, we will reconfigure them slightly to bring them into the assessment picture: we will make it a part of our standard department review protocol to ask the faculty to include assessment issues in the departmental self-study, a key part of the review. Faculty in the department will be asked how the department program contributes to the stated educational goals of the college and how they assess student learning with respect to those goals which are most relevant to the work of the department. The Office of Institutional Research will survey student majors and non-majors who have taken courses in the department and will provide the results to the department faculty.

At the end of the departmental review, the department chair meets with the Dean of the College, the President, the faculty co-chair of ECC, and the chair of the internal review committee to go over salient findings and agree upon a plan of action to improve the department's program. The part of the department review focusing on the assessment of student learning outcomes will be added to the existing agenda for such meetings. In order to protect faculty time, we propose to look at the structure of the departmental reviews to seek ways of streamlining the process without diluting its value to departments and the college.
C. Pilot projects

Interviews and discussions with students

One method of obtaining direct student feedback on their academic learning is through interviews or discussions between students and faculty. Because this technique has not been tried in any formal or systematic way at Carleton, we propose to seek the help of faculty in testing the usefulness of this approach through pilot programs in departments, concentrations, and/or college-wide.

There are many ways that such discussions could be structured. Here are four that are under consideration: 1) a small group of faculty in a department informally interview sophomores who have just decided to major in that field; 2) faculty members, working individually or in pairs, meet with small focus groups of seniors within a given department or concentration; 3) faculty conduct one-on-one interviews with several of the senior majors in their own department; 4) two or three faculty from different departments interview a randomly-selected group of seniors.

Since we do not know much about the problems and benefits of these approaches, we will encourage departments and individual faculty members volunteering for the pilot project to choose an approach that seems most appropriate given the number of faculty and students and the press of other activities. Departments will want to discuss this question with students through their Department Curriculum Committees. The Learning and Teaching Center and the Office of Institutional Research are available to help departments develop specific plans.

In all cases, we plan to ask the ECC and the group coordinating the assessment program, in consultation with the Office of Institutional Research, to provide a brief list of carefully designed, specific questions addressing the learning goals chosen for intensive attention that year. For example, faculty members might be asked to inquire about opportunities that students have had, through coursework or in other ways, to gain experience and develop skills in advanced reading, analytical thinking, and effective speaking before audiences; or questions might probe the students' experience with courses in departments outside their major and their awareness of "method and purpose" in other disciplines. Faculty interviewers will be free to allow the discussion to flow into other areas as well.

We will establish simple processes for faculty to report on these conversations so that information can be pulled together from throughout the college. In the case of focus groups, each faculty member who participates in a discussion can prepare a brief written report for the assessment coordinating group. In the case of one-to-one interviews with newly declared majors or senior majors, faculty in the department will discuss their students' comments during the end-of-year department meeting. In the department's annual report to the Dean of the College, the department chair will summarize the interviews and the department's analysis.
Student portfolios

Many colleges use student portfolios as an important element in their assessment programs. At Carleton we have a limited acquaintance with portfolios; however, several faculty members are interested in trying portfolios as a pilot project with a small number of interested students. These faculty will discuss the project with the Learning and Teaching Center Advisory Committee to develop a feasible plan.

Under one model being discussed, incoming first-year students would start portfolios that they would carry forward throughout their years at Carleton. The first entry could be the letter each student writes to his or her advisor before arriving on campus. Each year, the student could add a few significant examples of papers and other work, as well as an updated statement reviewing the progress the student has made over the past year and projecting his or her tentative plans for the next year or more.

Each year, under this plan, the student would have a conversation with the academic advisor about the portfolio and the student’s perception of his or her academic progress. The advisor would be obliged to read the summary statements, but not necessarily all the material that the student has chosen to include in the portfolio. In most cases, students change advisors when they declare a major, but the portfolio would provide information to help new advisors work more effectively with their advisees. At the end of the senior year, student participants in the portfolio program could provide formal feedback to the college about their academic learning.

Student portfolios would not only provide direct input from students about how they perceive their learning, but could also help students become more deliberate and reflective about their education and encourage them to participate more actively in planning their college careers. Portfolios also would provide a natural focus for dialogue between students and their advisors. They would provide an effective method for assessing some of the general educational goals of Carleton, including student writing, public speaking, and understanding of cultural diversity. We think that a portfolio program along these lines could be managed by the associate dean of the college who also supervises the academic advising system.

6. Responsibilities under the Assessment Program

Administrative supervision – the Dean of the College. Over-all responsibility for assessment and the improvement of student learning resides with the Dean of the College as chief academic officer. The Dean will ensure that assessment activities are completed in a timely and appropriate manner and that the college carries out curricular, departmental, and other procedures once these are decided upon by the ECC and the faculty.
Review and recommendations -- the Education and Curriculum Committee. The ECC is a major committee of the faculty. Its membership consists of the Dean of the College as chair, an elected faculty member, who serves as co-chair, and key academic administrators, elected faculty members, and elected students. Its mission is to articulate proposals for any changes to be made in educational policy and to present those proposals to the faculty for consideration for adoption. The committee both initiates proposals and projects and responds to initiatives from the faculty and academic administration. But final action on any initiative, no matter what its original source, must be taken by the faculty. The assessment plan designates the ECC as the standing committee responsible for: 1) regularly reviewing assessment information provided by the coordinating group (see below); 2) developing appropriate courses of action in response to them; and 3) making specific recommendations to the faculty. These roles are in accordance with the ECC's general function in the college.

Routine management of the program -- coordinating group. Carleton is a small college that already boasts a very high level of faculty participation in the governance of the institution. Faculty are also heavily committed to teaching, scholarship, departmental administration, advising, and helping students prepare for comps. We are reluctant, therefore, to create a formal standing committee to oversee assessment activities. Yet it is obviously of great importance that faculty participate in managing the program.

We will rely on a small coordinating group of three: the Dean of the College, an associate dean of the college, and the faculty co-chair of the ECC. As one of the two associate deans is always a tenured faculty member holding a temporary appointment in the Office of the Dean, two of the three members of the group will be members of the faculty.

This group will study incoming reports from departments, student surveys, and any other relevant information. It will present periodic reports to departments, programs, the ECC, and the faculty. To facilitate its work, the group will receive staff support through the Office of the Dean of the College and the Office of Institutional Research.

Decision and action -- the faculty. The Carleton faculty is, and will continue to be, deeply involved in planning and carrying out most of the assessment activities that take place at Carleton. The present plan relies heavily on the continuing participation of faculty members in the academic departments, the interdisciplinary programs, and the committee structure of the college. The faculty, through their monthly meeting, will receive and consider proposals from ECC and either accept them or return them for further work.

Assistance and support -- the Office of Institutional Research. This administrative office participates actively in assessment activities through its ongoing program of surveying students and graduates about their experience at Carleton. The Director of Institutional Research will advise the coordinating group and the ECC about assessment strategies, design and administer
questionnaires to students and alums as needed, help the coordinating group interpret incoming data, and write periodic reports to the faculty.

**Assistance and support – the Learning and Teaching Center.** Like the Office of Institutional Research, the Learning and Teaching Center will advise and support the assessment program. The Center will be asked to hold workshops on specific teaching and assessment strategies, including such possibilities as the effective use of student portfolios, incorporating student speaking into courses, and discussing what we mean by "method and purpose" in a discipline.

7. **Beginning the Program**

We will put this assessment program into effect beginning in 1995-96. The first year or two will require some start-up activities in addition to the ongoing activities described above:

**Initial specification of components**

While the Carleton faculty share an informal understanding of the phrases used in the list of goals, they recognize a need in some cases to discuss the terms more fully. What does it mean to "read perceptively and critically" (goal 1)? What does it mean to "become acquainted with method and purpose" in the humanities and other broad realms of knowledge (goal 5)? What does it mean to "acquire an awareness of cultural diversity" (goal 7)? Without more thorough discussion to frame the goals more clearly, assessment will be difficult.

The Dean, the ECC, and the faculty will turn to this task during the two-year start-up period. In fact, a good portion of the Faculty Retreat on August 31 will be devoted to discussion of Carleton’s teaching and learning goals. By the end of this period we hope to achieve broad general agreement among the faculty regarding what we are striving to accomplish with each of the specific learning goals.

**Helping the faculty prepare**

In order to acquaint faculty members with assessment concepts and to help them develop new skills in this area, the Learning and Teaching Center will be on call to offer workshops. Future Faculty Retreats, held annually at the beginning of the academic year, will also devote time to key ideas and expectations of the assessment plan.

8. **Matching Goals with Assessment Practices**

The chart below summarizes our current thinking about which assessment practices might best match which goals for student learning. Experience over the next few years will reveal how accurate it proves to be! For the present, we wish to emphasize two points. First, this experiment strongly suggests that certain
assessment practices are likely to yield particularly rich results. This is not to say that we should rely exclusively on those practices, should our prediction prove out. After all, even a useful assessment practice may be unsupportable if it proves too costly in faculty and administrative time. Second, the chart shows that the plan has a considerable degree of redundancy inasmuch as most goals can be assessed through several means. In practice, we do not intend to use all these assessment techniques all the time. Within a few years we expect to narrow our list of heavily used assessment practices.

Table 1: Assessment practices matched to goals for student academic learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL</th>
<th>ASSESSMENT PRACTICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Advanced reading skills</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a Speaking before groups</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b Writing skills</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Second language</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Knowledge of discipline</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Method &amp; purpose in several fields</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Analyze &amp; synthesize</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Cultural diversity</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Work effectively in groups/teams</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Other cultural &amp; intellectual opportunities</td>
<td>![Table Content]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: a Periodic reviews of student writing organized by staff of the Writing Program Language examinations, students completing more advanced language courses, students use the language in other courses at the college, possibly student participation in foreign-study programs

9. Closing the Loop

The point of all this assessment activity is not to collect information for its own sake but to use the information to assist the academic departments and programs of the college in helping students to achieve more with respect to the stated goals. If we regard the assessment program as a feedback loop, then the plan must make clear who will be responsible for analyzing the information
about student learning, how the information is to be passed on to relevant parties, and how the weaknesses identified through assessment will be addressed in a timely manner.

At the level of department goals for student achievement, particularly mastery of basic skills and knowledge of the discipline, faculty members in the departments act autonomously much of the time. In their own courses and through other contacts with students, faculty members assess the effectiveness of their own teaching strategies. As department members, they routinely review assessment information gathered from comps and other sources and decide on changes in their own teaching methods, the content of their courses, and their major requirements. The college assessment plan will enable us to ask and answer broader questions: not only how students are doing at learning a discipline-based body of knowledge and technique, but what they are learning with respect to educational goals that do not fall readily into any one discipline, such as ability to use a second language and basic understanding of fields outside their major.

How will this work? What follows is a sketch of how the process can routinely operate—though experience will no doubt suggest modifications. Our main intentions in this sketch are to spell out who has what responsibilities and to indicate a plausible timetable for routine assessment.

Notice that we think it impractical and unnecessary to assess student learning on every goal every year. Here again we invoke the NCA's principle of cost-effectiveness. In general, we intend to focus assessment activities each year on two or three of the nine goals for student academic achievement. Thus, while information relevant to most goals will flow in every year, each goal will come in for more thorough scrutiny every few years.

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4 In the words of the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board, "the number of assessment dimensions should be kept to a manageable number." Quoted in Patricia A. Thrash, "State Agency Expectation for Assessment in the North Central Region," NCA Quarterly 65 (Fall 1990): 415-34 at 425.
Table 2: The annual assessment cycle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term/season</th>
<th>Summer</th>
<th>Fall</th>
<th>Fall-Winter-Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Compile assessment information from previous year</td>
<td>(a) Early in the fall, disseminate key findings; discuss at college and department levels; agree upon strategies for improvement</td>
<td>(a) Institute agreed-upon changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible parties</td>
<td>The Office of the Dean; the Office of Institutional Research</td>
<td>(a) Coordinating group; ECC; Faculty</td>
<td>(a) ECC; Faculty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To walk through the chart term-by-term:

**Summer.** The Dean of the College and the Office of Institutional Research will begin the cycle during the summer by compiling recent information pertaining to student learning on the selected goals (including earlier reviews).5

Even at this first stage of the annual cycle, it may be possible to develop specific questions that faculty members can use during the coming year in interviewing students as well as questions that the Dean might ask department chairs to address in their annual reports. Institutional Research will extend this work during the summer by identifying appropriate questions that appear on the standard surveys and framing in-house questions to be used.

**Fall.** At the beginning of the academic year, the coordinating group will meet to review the information compiled over the summer. The group will develop a summary of their findings and report to the ECC. The faculty will be kept informed of the findings of the most recent assessment activities and the deliberations of the ECC through inclusion in our regularly-published faculty newsletter. It will then be up to the Dean, ECC, and faculty to decide when to focus on an identified problem area in depth. Most directly, ECC could appoint an ad hoc task force and ask it to recommend specific steps to be taken to

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5 A note on sensitive information: Students' comments from interviews, questionnaires, and the like will be passed on to the oversight group without students' names attached and in many cases as aggregated information. In the case of departmental annual reports sent to the Dean, only information related to assessment activities will be shared with the oversight group; the same principle will hold with respect to the full departmental reviews carried out on a rotating basis.
address a perceived problem of significant proportions. Or ECC could flag the matter for possible future attention after more data are available.

With respect to assessment for the coming year, the ECC, advised by the coordinating group, will recommend to the faculty a set of assessment priorities and procedures for the year.

**Academic year as a whole.** Most assessment activities on college-wide goals and involving the faculty will take place during winter and spring terms. During this period the coordinating group will have particular responsibility for providing advice and assistance to departments as they plan and carry out assessment activities, while the Office of Institutional Research will devote its assessment attention to the annual and other cyclical sets of surveys.

This routine will help the faculty and administration spot areas of potential concern and prompt them to agree upon and implement a plan of response within a reasonable time. However, that requires that the assessment plan merge with long-standing practices of setting and implementing educational policy. Thus, fully closing the loop typically will require action by the ECC and the faculty. On matters that may entail significant changes in educational practice at Carleton, the ECC will propose such changes to the faculty, which will discuss and vote on them.

As chief academic officer, the Dean certainly may cut through these procedures to take action on her own when necessary. For example:

- When departments can pick up useful approaches to a learning problem from one another or where many departments appear to be facing a common problem, the simplest thing to do may be for the Dean to disseminate information across departments by discussing a matter in the monthly meeting of department chairs or by sending a brief report to the faculty; or the Dean may ask the coordinating group to get the word out by means of our faculty newsletter. The Dean may also ask the Learning and Teaching Center to organize a workshop around a particular learning problem.

- When a department's efforts in the college assessment program appear to be weak or confused (for example, in the form of a perfunctory departmental annual report), the Dean may ask the department chair to provide more or better information or may instruct the department to handle a problem in a different way.

- For student learning deemed inadequate on a college-wide basis, the Dean will take the matter to the ECC or to the faculty as a whole.
10. Assessing and Modifying the Assessment Plan Itself

Inasmuch as the assessment activities outlined in this plan will inevitably divert some faculty time and energy from other activities considered important to the health of the college, such as scholarly research and writing, interdisciplinary teaching, third-year and tenure reviews of junior faculty members, and spending time with students, it is appropriate that the assessment program itself be subjected to searching reviews. As the plan indicates, we intend over the first few years to assess the effectiveness of various assessment techniques with an eye to emphasizing those that yield the most useful information at the least cost, while de-emphasizing others.

The Dean of the College and the ECC will also plan an appropriate review of the program as a whole, to take place after the plan has been in operation for three years. This happens to coincide with Carleton's next reaccreditation review. The assessment review will evaluate the costs and the benefits of the program and look for ways to improve and streamline it.