

INSTITUTIONAL SELF-STUDY REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The only hope of the small college ... lies in the adventurous spirits in its faculty who dare to try educational experiments. (President Edgar Park, 1937)

Though Wheaton's curriculum has centered on the liberal arts for more than 150 years, its validity and vitality are the product of the constant willingness to blend tradition and change, to reach out to new knowledge, to challenge prevailing societal stereotypes about women, and to seek new approaches to teaching and learning.
(1989 Self Study)

Becoming a coeducational college did not so much change our mission as a liberal arts institution as focus its application on a new student population. Our mission is more clearly and more widely articulated than it was ten years ago because we have had to devote new attention to what we must do to fulfill it in the context of a redefined student market and campus environment. Having repositioned the College, the challenge is now to use our growing popularity to improve our position among leading liberal arts colleges.
(1999 Self Study)

The hallmark of Wheaton College is a willingness to take risks, to change academic and institutional directions, and to do so as a community cognizant of and relying on our shared values and traditions. Throughout our long history and frequently over the past several decades, the themes of change and risk-taking have defined us as an institution. In the 1960s, the college doubled in size, expanding its facilities and personnel with the goal of enhancing excellence while maintaining our liberal arts focus. During the 1970s and into the 1980s, under the leadership of its first woman president, Wheaton proudly recommitted to its women's college identity by leading the nation's colleges in integrating the study of women into the liberal arts curriculum. At the end of the 1980s, we opened our doors to men, risking criticism but recognizing, as then-President Alice Emerson said at the time, "... not only must coeducation involve the development of a frame of reference, a set of underlying assumptions, which goes beyond conventional views of men and women, their roles and interrelationships ... [we must] create a model of coeducation that will be different from those developed at an earlier time" From the 1990s to the present, we have grown successfully into our new identity as a coeducational institution, experiencing growth in the number of students and faculty, and experiencing important changes in programs and structures.

The decade since our last self study (1999-2009) has been marked by considerable achievement. It has been a time for the institution to build upon and enhance its excellence, to realize our long-held goal of diversifying the faculty and the student body and to put in place a "new curriculum." This innovative curriculum once again forges for Wheaton a leadership role among liberal arts institutions as we illuminate connections across the liberal arts and infuse study and scholarship with the knowledge of gender, racial, ethnic, religious and global diversity. The establishment of new and expanded programs, such as the Center for Global Education and the Office of Service, Spirituality and Social Responsibility, offers our students a broader range of learning opportunities. The benefits of Wheaton's enhanced educational programs are exemplified by the more than 115 students who have won academic fellowships, such as the Rhodes, Truman and Fulbright, since 1999.

A sound financial footing is vital for the foundation that it provides for all activities of the institution. The college maintained financial equilibrium even as it invested more resources in academic programs and student financial aid. A key to this foundation has been increased effectiveness in student admission, as applications have grown by a third during the past decade. Incremental growth in the student body, along with increases in the comprehensive fee, have built up the operating base. Finally, a record level of philanthropy in recent years has fueled the college's increasing strength through support for new facilities as well as new and expanded programs.

The growth, change and accomplishment of the past decade have brought new challenges. Taken together, many of the issues that the college faces center on the difficulties in maintaining our uniquely collaborative and collegial community. The realities of growth, rapid change and greater diversity test our ability to sustain an atmosphere in which shared values and expectations allow for creative collaboration, which has long been a hallmark of Wheaton College. As a community, we are working to affirm cultural norms and operational processes that facilitate collaboration and bring people together around our common goals.

In addition to the expansion of the student body and faculty, Wheaton has experienced significant personnel and organizational changes over the past decade. We have welcomed a new president, and prospered from the creative academic leadership of two provosts and an interim provost. We have now welcomed a new provost, the third in the past ten years, and a new vice president and dean of students in July 2009, our first in more than 20 years. A new vice president for advancement has helped us prepare for a comprehensive campaign, currently in its quiet phase and moving toward a public announcement. We have re-organized and consolidated our library, technology, and information operations into a new organization: Library and Information Services. Faculty and staff have worked together to implement an exciting new curriculum; under the leadership of our new president, we have undertaken a productive round of strategic planning, a process that has helped us recognize a need to incorporate long-term institutional planning into our ongoing operations. We established the Center for Global Education to enrich our curriculum by encouraging a global focus inside and outside of the classroom. Our advising centers were melded to form the Filene Center for Academic Advising and Career Services so that we could enhance the support and services available to students in the academic, experiential, co-curricular, and career planning areas. We established the Office of Service, Spirituality and Social Responsibility to encourage students to reflect upon their actions, values and beliefs and on the ways these affect their own intellectual development, the people around them and the communities of which they are a part. Finally, we have been engaged for several years in planning a new science center, which will transform the campus physically and intellectually, promising a continuation of change and growth in this community.

While many of these changes entail considerable adaptation, we are confident that our commitment to collaboration and collegial partnerships, and our willingness to embrace change, will see us through once again. We know that we must collaborate to affirm our shared values and determine how we can best work together as a larger and more diverse community. Generational, racial, and ethnic differences among the faculty have challenged us in various ways to keep alive the very connections that have shaped us as a community and enabled us to overcome similar challenges in the past. Moreover, race, class and ethnic differences among students mean that the Wheaton each of them experiences may be a very different college than the one we are committed to offering. How do we guide them and, at the same time, seek their help in shaping a Wheaton that celebrates difference as it grows more inclusive and richer for its diversity? How do we ensure that staff have their needs met and develop the kind of institutional commitment we have relied on so heavily in the past to sustain us as a community?

Wheaton is not alone in confronting the challenges of growth and change, but we know that, because of our institutional history and strong community roots, we are better positioned than most to find institutional answers to them. As noted in the 2003 report from Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practices): "Wheaton community members' voices and the ideas they communicate are valued at the College. Whether regarding a major change, such as a change in the College's mission or curriculum, or day-to-day communication about the business of the College, Wheaton emphasizes and values the individual's contributions to the whole. It is a campus where the needs of the few and the needs of the majority are given equal voice. Faculty members seek out staff and student input as a matter of course. The message these practices send is clear: everyone is welcome at the table."

Description

This self study describes an institution with a solid sense of purpose and a commitment to academic vibrancy. This will be evident in descriptions of the current Wheaton under each of the standards for accreditation. Within the past few years we have revised and clarified our mission and purpose statements, and have used them to establish an ongoing process for planning and evaluation that incorporates all segments of the college. Our review of organization and governance reveals a board of trustees committed to supporting institutional initiatives; a president and president's council adjusting to turnover and working toward revitalizing collaboration across divisions; and a faculty governance structure that is being tested, and yet used effectively; by administrative changes; by growth in the number of faculty; and by generational changes within its ranks.

Our academic program, clearly the heart of the institution, has become richer and more robust through significant revisions in the curriculum, which connected across divisions and infused the institution with a culture of assessment that bodes well for the future. None of these academic changes would have been possible without the support of an increasingly diverse faculty, whose members clearly rise to the multiple challenges of providing excellent undergraduate teaching and advising while producing a remarkably rich collection of scholarship, ongoing research, and creative activity. Several new positions, along with the conversion of several administrative positions to faculty appointments (in recognition that the primary responsibilities in these roles centered on teaching and mentoring students), have allowed us to achieve a 10:1 student-faculty ratio. In addition, the support for faculty research was recently augmented. Support for teaching and learning comes from a set of advising offices, newly merged, that provide students and faculty with a rich array of services to support all aspects of the learning process. Overarching and underlying all teaching, learning and administrative activities on campus are library and information resources and staff members committed to training and supporting faculty in the teaching and learning process, while ensuring access to timely information needed for administrative planning and assessment.

The admission and retention of students shape many of our institutional activities. Our admission successes over the past decade have been extraordinary, the product of hard work and a genuinely attractive packaging of the Wheaton message and product, but sustaining them will require even more focused attention. While retention has improved since the last reaccreditation cycle, it remains a constant challenge, one that demands teamwork across all divisions of the college and a clearer understanding of how to sustain our successes. The Student Affairs staff ensures that an enormous amount of student learning occurs outside the classroom in dorms and theme houses, in the Marshall Center for Intercultural Learning, in the work of student government, through healthy discussion about the Honor Code and what it means for student rights and responsibilities, and through an increasing number of community service projects and other student activities that enrich campus life. New connections between the divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs are invigorating the focus on retention.

While many of our physical resources are aging, they are well maintained and managed, ensuring that a visit to our campus still helps to recruit students, impress visitors, and accomplish our educational mission. Our technological resources present a constant challenge as we race to keep up with innovations that enable the best teaching and learning possible. We remain a college that makes the most of modest financial resources through sound investment policies and erudite management techniques. As always, we continue to get the most out of what we have, but remain cognizant of the fact that we also must grow what we have. The conservative management of our moderate endowment has served us well. Wheaton has experienced smaller losses than some other institutions have during the current economic downturn. However, our losses have had substantial implications for operating budgets, and community constituencies continue to work together to respond with policies that put people first. We have enhanced our capabilities in the area of public disclosure with an internet presence, e-mail use, and Communications Office staff members who convey our messages in a timely, clear and honest fashion. And finally, as always, there is no question that we meet the highest standards of integrity in all that we do.

Appraisal

Wheaton is a vibrant and strong educational community that accomplishes a great deal with limited resources. Members of this community are proud of the recognition for excellence that we receive, whether through the Project DEEP focus on student engagement, mass media notice such as the *New York Times* “hidden gems” list, the recent attention that our connected curriculum has garnered from our peers at many liberal arts institutions, the number of national and international fellowships our students win, or the number of competitive research awards our faculty earn. We remain committed to doing better and we have used this self-study process to identify areas for improvement.

The Wheaton College community took the opportunity presented by this self study to identify and explore institutional issues and programs that need attention. In each instance, these issues emerge from the narrative and data available for each standard. Some concerns are already being addressed as a result of the community discussions that were part of the self-study process; others arose from the college’s ongoing planning and evaluation efforts. Thus, what follows should be read as a work in progress. Moreover, this list does not reflect any agreed-upon institutional order of priorities.

Planning and Governance

As we remain committed to our mission, we have to ensure that both our long-term and annual planning is inclusive, provides continuity, is coupled with assessment, and includes the cross-divisional sharing of data. One aspect of this challenge centers on our learning, as a community, how and when to share information in ways that facilitate productive and inclusive discussions. The current economic recession has revealed, more than ever, the need for multiple perspectives and mutual trust across different operating areas as we maintain sound management of financial resources to enhance our learning environments while being judicious about expenditures. Or as one person put it, we need strategies that allow for creativity and growth as well as frugality.

In the spring of 2008 members of the faculty and staff raised questions about how deeply members of the President’s Council see themselves as a leadership team and how effectively they adhere to the norm of cross-divisional cooperation. With new council members now in place, we expect that such collegial leadership will be reinvigorated.

Learning Outcomes and Environment

In the academic area we must enhance and regularize the assessment processes that we put in place under the Educational Policy Committee as part of our recent curriculum review, and we must integrate curriculum assessment and planning with resource allocation. We have strengthened our assessment tools and capabilities over the past several years more or less on an *ad hoc* basis. We can sustain our own commitments to assessing the success of our curriculum and living up to national expectations for evaluating student learning outcomes only through accessing staffing and resources in the Provost’s Office. We should also evaluate how successful the recent merger of advising centers and functions has been as we seek to provide the best possible academic support programs for our students.

The work of the Student Affairs division of the college is intrinsically important to our educational goals. With a new dean in place it is time to do a thoughtful assessment of Student Life and other offices and programs to ensure that we are connecting with students in ways that enhance education and personal growth.

Facilities

The Science Center must be completed as soon as possible. The planning process for the building, with 100 percent completion of the design phase along with the groundbreaking this past year, has raised hopes and expectations. There is general agreement that completing the Science Center will enhance the learning and

teaching environment, contribute to admission of top students, and facilitate our retention efforts. The current suspension of the project has adversely affected morale.

Overcrowding of residence space has affected student retention, programming, and the learning environment for a number of years. We should find ways to become more efficient in residence allocation and to expand residential space so that the quality of learning inside and outside of the classroom is not undermined by overcrowded living situations.

Our successful athletics program enhances campus life, helps with admission and retention, and furthers Wheaton's regional and national reach. More important, the program offers students an outlet for athletic competition and the opportunity to develop leadership, teamwork and discipline skills that have lasting personal, intellectual and professional value. In fact, we continue to focus on the educational value of athletics as the primary reason for the inclusion of sports in an academic institution. The establishment of a faculty ombudsman to the athletics program has resulted in successful collaboration with the department to ensure that academics remain a priority. However, resources and facilities have not kept up with needs in this area. We ought to put together a task force to assess where we are and where we want to be with our athletics program and to develop a strategic plan for moving us forward over the next decade.

Faculty

At open meetings, some faculty have expressed concerns about whether their voices are really heard in decision making, and whether the faculty's own governance structure satisfies its current needs. One response to this concern was the establishment of the Untenured Faculty Organization (UFO), which provides a forum and a voice for the concerns of untenured faculty members. The group's inclusion at numerous college events in the past two years testifies to our commitment to inclusiveness and broad engagement. The recent return of the Advisory Committee to its intended central role in communication with the administration, and the successful involvement of faculty in the recent provost search provide indications of positive change. With the support of the president and the interim provost, faculty convened as the Committee of the Whole far more often than in the recent past, facilitating discussions in which all voices could be heard. However, opportunities for faculty to interact with members of the Board of Trustees have diminished at a time when academic governing boards increasingly need to understand the changed and changing roles of college faculties.

While we responded to faculty workload concerns of a decade ago by establishing the 3-2 teaching load currently in place, we now should develop institutional guidelines for the appropriate metrics to use for determining actual workload across departments and faculty members in order to respond to faculty concerns about equity.

In the strongest terms, most faculty members have expressed the desire to have a clear salary plan in place, one that connects salaries to institutional benchmarks as in the past. Both faculty and staff look forward to working with the administration and trustees to find ways of managing benefits, particularly those related to health and retirement.

Philanthropy

Wheaton needs to continue to attract grants and new endowed funds to support curriculum and research work of faculty. We currently do a lot with little, and now we need to find resources that allow us to do a lot with more. For example, we run the risk of slipping behind in terms of instructional technology resources, and we must seek both grants and endowed funds to help us stay abreast of developments in this area.

Projections

We anticipate that much of the next decade at Wheaton will be spent matching expectations with finances. While current predictions are that the national economy will recover from the recession within a few years,

the ripple effects in academia from financial losses and belt-tightening measures will continue for quite some time. The college will not be able to rely on past strategies to advance academic excellence and sustain financial equilibrium, but through creative energy and collaborative efforts, we will develop new approaches to maintain affordability and access for students and their families.

As the college addresses the immediate issues of diminishing resources and cost containment, primary consideration continues to focus on the need for solid financing plans for modernizing and expanding the college's science facilities. In addition, it is important that the college's physical and technological resources be maintained and enhanced in support of critical institutional priorities. There is an increasing need for a comprehensive, prioritized, multi-year set of plans for investing in and financing the maintenance and enhancement of the college's facilities and technologies, with such plans being integrated and consistent with strategic goals and priorities.

Our Planning and Priorities Committee, just coming to fruition now, will facilitate the ongoing strategic planning needed to meet these challenges. Working in concert with the president, President's Council, the Board of Trustees and other ongoing planning structures, the PPC will enable us to retain a forward-looking approach to education and finances. This work will include the development of a new, sustainable plan for faculty/staff compensation to ensure that the college continues to be successful in recruiting and retaining the talented people to sustain a vibrant learning community.

Wheaton's culture of assessment, shored up by institution-wide sharing of information, will play a critical role in the efficacy of our planning efforts and our operations. The oversight and even some of the work of evaluation will be more securely embedded in the Provost's Office. The college will have established formal processes for the collection and dissemination of curriculum assessment data, to ensure that our data are available to and used by all relevant constituencies.

Equipped with summative data from the college's ongoing assessment efforts, the provost and faculty will be engaged in the next phase of curriculum planning to keep Wheaton in the forefront of liberal arts colleges and aligned with the needs of a new generation of students. Data from the college's comprehensive assessment and evaluation processes will also play a key role in ensuring a vibrant learning community beyond the classroom.

The college's cross-divisional approach to addressing student retention will embrace a comprehensive strategy with realistic targets for realizing and maintaining improvements. The alleviation of residence hall overcrowding will contribute to this goal. We also anticipate a formal study of our athletics program, which has consistently contributed to our student recruitment, engagement, and overall student satisfaction, in order to sustain this program with the resources, staffing, and facilities that it needs. With a new dean of students and vice president for student affairs in place, it is time to rethink divisional organization, structures and programs. We expect that the next five years will see important changes that will enhance work within the division and strengthen students' connections to the resources and services that the division has to offer.

In essence, Wheaton faces challenges in securing the resources that will allow it to both preserve and remake itself. The very qualities that make a small college like Wheaton successful are the very ones that require moderation in order to prevent insularity: a lack of hierarchy, closeness of community and a dependence on relationships that transcend the more complex structures of larger institutions. This moderation occurs through our ability to move beyond our own four corners physically and virtually, expanding the borders of our and our students' understanding as we continuously return to community and, in doing so, reshape its contours to meet the world.