

Award Title

Assessment in Action: The Student Satisfaction Survey at Washington & Jefferson College

Awards Categories

Administrative, Assessment, Information Technology, Fundraising, Professional Development and related

Executive Summary

Washington & Jefferson College's Student Satisfaction Survey is an instrument that was developed in 2005 by the Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs, Enrollment, and Student Life. The survey was initially designed to gather data to prepare for re-accreditation but has since grown into an indispensable fixture of ongoing planning and assessment efforts. The survey is administered annually to first year students and seniors in the fall and to first years and sophomores in the spring. The survey instrument includes items that assess students' campus activities and involvement; student ratings of teaching, academic advising, and course offerings; administrative services; and campus climate, in addition to items that address the specific mission and character of Washington & Jefferson (W&J). An overview is online here: <https://www.washjeff.edu/student-life/student-satisfaction-survey-results>

Included in the survey are institutional characteristics discovered in research conducted by Admission staff and other consultants a decade ago. Alumni, current students and even prospective students described W&J as a place with close student and faculty relationships, a place with academic rigor and challenge, a place to get involved in co-curricular activities, a place that empowers students, and a place that prepares students for life after college. Our survey asks students to indicate whether W&J has exceeded their expectations, met their expectations, or not met their expectations. Factor analysis, regression analysis and longitudinal analysis reveal that high student ratings in these areas positively correlate with student retention. When we combined these factors into a scale of overall satisfaction, for instance, we found that 95.5% of the students who reported W&J exceeded their expectations in these five areas persisted from first year to sophomore year, as opposed to students who reported that W&J has only met their expectations or not met their expectations – only 81% of these students persist.

The inclusion of these questions, which are posed in the survey using the exact language that emerged from previous research, has helped us understand our institutional strengths. An "off the shelf" or proprietary third-party survey may not have asked these questions, or asked them in a way that resonates with our students; additionally, a third-party survey may not have helped us determine a relationship between institutional characteristics and retention.

Award Description

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grown into an indispensable fixture of ongoing planning and assessment efforts. The survey is administered annually to first year students and seniors in the fall and to first years and sophomores in the spring. The survey instrument includes items that assess students' campus activities and involvement; student ratings of teaching, academic advising, and course offerings; administrative services; and campus climate, in addition to items that address the specific mission and character of Washington & Jefferson (W&J).

Nearly 80% of first year students are responding in their first semester and between 72% and 75% respond in the spring; nearly 75% of the senior class completes the survey; and around 70% of the sophomores respond. Any section of First Year Seminar section with a 100% response rate earns coffee and donuts for a class study break and the first year residence hall with the highest overall response rate earns a pizza party before finals. The first 200 responders receive free coffee coupons and prize drawings for popular items, like Wii game systems, are offered to encourage students to respond.

The survey is administered by Human Capital Research Corporation (HCRC), a company we consult with on admission and financial aid strategies. The Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs, Enrollment, and Student Life review the survey questions annually and make additions or minor adjustments if necessary. This way, the survey retains a W&J feel. HCRC sends the surveys to students electronically, along with a series of reminders. HCRC is able to keep the survey responses confidential while simultaneously having access to unit record data to help us learn as much as possible from the survey results and response patterns. HCRC runs regressions using students' demographic data, grade point averages, financial aid, and other factors. The aggregate data are reported to W&J. We can drill into data sets as needed while maintaining student confidentiality.

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The inclusion of these questions, which are posed in the survey using language that emerged from previous research, has helped us understand our institutional strengths. An “off the shelf” or proprietary third-party survey may not have asked these questions, or asked them in a way that resonates with our students; additionally, a third-party survey may not have helped us determine a relationship between institutional characteristics and retention. In addition to a general

satisfaction scale, we have also used factor analysis to create scales to represent students' ratings and perceptions of campus social life and engagement with peers. The social life scale reports student ratings and satisfaction with the following Student Satisfaction Survey Likert scale items:

-- There are sufficient opportunities for me to become involved on campus. -- There are sufficient social activities on campus that do not involve alcohol. -- There are sufficient weekend social activities and events.

-- I am able to study in my residence hall without unreasonable interruption.

-- Living in my residence hall is a positive experience.

-- I am satisfied with the general maintenance and cleanliness of my residence hall.

The peer scale includes Likert scale items from the survey as well as self-reported data about student involvement in intramurals, varsity athletics, or student organizations. The specific Likert scale survey questions for the peer scale are:

-- Students at W&J treat one another with respect and dignity irrespective of their likes and dislikes.

-- In general, is it your experience that students at W&J discriminate against (discrimination coding is reverse):

- Women
- Students who come from non-Christian religious groups
- Students from racial minority groups
- Students who self-identify or are suspected of being GLBT
- Students who come from lower economic backgrounds
- People who are considered overweight

For the fall 2008 first year cohort, retention rates for the most satisfied students compared to the least satisfied students range 92.2% to 63.6% on the social scale and 92.9% to 82.0% on the peer scale. Though not as strong, we see similar effects on student academic performance (our performance criteria are described on slide 28). Looking at results from 2005 through 2008, academic performance for the most satisfied students compared to the least satisfied students ranged from 82% to 67.9% on the general scale, 82.7% to 67.3% on the social scale, and 86.4% to 73.8% on the peer scale. The general satisfaction scale, social satisfaction scale and peer satisfaction scale are featured in our online overview of the survey (<https://www.washjeff.edu/student-life/student-satisfaction-survey-results>), on slides 3 to 26.

Slide 27 reports the relationship between each scale to student retention and to student academic performance.

Regression analysis also indicates the frequency and reasons students go home on weekends may be critically important to retention. The survey asks students how often they go home on weekends and the reasons they go home. We learned there is no attrition risk if students are going home even as often as twice each month to spend time with family or to work, but students are extremely unlikely to return to W&J as sophomores if they are going home every weekend. Having quantitative data, discerned through regression analysis, has not only validated our “gut” feeling, but also given us a concrete talking point to discuss with faculty and staff. One of our regressions is included in our online overview of the survey on slide 29.

In addition to these findings about student retention, the Student Satisfaction Survey enables us to be responsive to immediate student needs. For example, when students complained in very large numbers about wireless service in the residence halls, we ran reports of student internet usage and saw that we were, indeed, at capacity. The College made the decision to double bandwidth and reported at a Student Government General Assembly meeting that changes would occur within months. Students cheered when they heard the news! This may not seem significant, but by establishing feedback loops and affecting quick change that students can see, we have built students’ confidence in the survey and thereby increased response rates.

We have also presented Student Satisfaction Survey findings to parents, to enlist their aid in encouraging students to stay on campus on the weekends, and to our Board of Trustees, to help them understand the dynamics of student retention and student success.

Assessment Data

The Student Satisfaction Survey at Washington & Jefferson College (W&J) has been an extremely useful tool in terms of monitoring student retention, providing feedback to faculty and staff, and promoting institutional change and innovation. For example, Academic Affairs replaced Freshman Forum with a new First Year Seminar program after several years of consistent survey feedback about the Freshman Forum, a traditional “introduction to college” course. Each First Year Seminar has been developed by an individual faculty member on a topic such as game theory, technology and film, or robotics. Faculty design and teach these courses to introduce students to W&J’s approach to the liberal arts and to help students transition to college-level work and expectations. This major change would not have happened without the Student Satisfaction Survey results. This is an example of how the data and research findings we’ve been able to gather and generate from the Student Satisfaction Survey have enabled us to understand and improve the undergraduate experience at W&J.

While our assessment of the Student Satisfaction Survey deals largely with how useful we have found the results, the Student Satisfaction Survey has also helped us assess other campus initiatives and respond quickly to student concerns. This assessment of the Student Satisfaction Survey will briefly address each of these areas.

Retention Feedback for Faculty and Staff. Our longitudinal data reveals that almost one-third of the students who do not return as sophomores earned a 3.0 g.p.a. or higher their first year. These students report high levels of involvement in co-curricular activities and indicate high levels of satisfaction in close student-faculty relationships. They are less likely to agree that W&J exceeds their expectations of rigor and challenge (54.7% of students over 3.0 vs. 64.5% of those below a 3.0), however, and more likely to disagree that there are sufficient social opportunities that do not involve alcohol (47.9% of students over 3.0 vs. 29.4% of those below a 3.0). To demonstrate these findings to faculty and staff, we employed CHAID (Chi-squared Automatic Interaction Detector) Analysis, or Decision Tree Analysis. We used what looks like a “decision tree”, or flow chart, to visually explain the reasons some of our brightest students have transferred. One faculty member found these findings dubious and asked his students for feedback. He told us he was surprised to learn that some of his own smart students did, in fact, feel a “party culture” unfairly dominated campus life. He has since stopped using examples involving references to alcohol and partying in his lessons.

Members of both the faculty and the staff have been extremely responsive to these data and have begun planning events and activities on weekends to keep students engaged, or at least included information about weekend activities on their syllabi. Academic administrators, members of the faculty, and members of the Student Life staff now meet to review upcoming lectures, cultural events on campus and in Pittsburgh, Student Life-sponsored programs, and weekend trips organized by Student Life and by student organizations. Student Satisfaction Survey findings provided the inspiration for these meetings.

Institutional Innovation and Change. Our transition from the required Freshman Forum introductory course to the First Year Seminar program was based on Student Satisfaction Survey findings. We saw remarkable improvements in student ratings after just the first year of the change. Previously, less than 34% of respondents strongly agreed the Freshman Forum helped students understand W&J's approach to the liberal arts and barely more than 15% strongly agreed Freshman Forum prepared them for college-level work. After just the first year for the First Year Seminar, we saw dramatic improvements on both these items: 52% of respondents strongly agreed the First Year Seminar helped students understand W&J's approach to the liberal arts and 35% strongly agreed First Year Seminar prepared them for college-level work. These positive increases held or improved in the second year of the First Year Seminar program.

These data are presented each year to the entire faculty each year by the Vice President of Student Life and the faculty Director of the First Year Seminars. The Vice President and Director also present these data to the cohort of First Year Seminar instructors, who use the findings to discuss pedagogy, strategies for discussing the liberal arts, out of class experiences, and more. This is a positive outcome we would have never imagined when we first launched the Student Satisfaction Survey.

Assessing Other Initiatives. The Magellan Project is W&J's campus version of a Watson or Fulbright Fellowship: a campus award for independent student scholarship, research, internships, and other student designed projects. We compared the Student Satisfaction Survey responses of students who received funding from W&J's Magellan Project to the responses of students who have not and discovered, after controlling for g.p.a., studying abroad, and science majors (over

one third of Magellan-funded students are in the sciences), that students who completed Magellan projects rated W&J more highly in the following areas:

- Expectations of W&J as a place with close student and faculty relationships
- Expectations of W&J as a place to get involved in extracurricular activities
- Expectations of W&J as a place that “empowers me to become what I want to be”
- Expectations of W&J as a place that “will prepare me for the world after W&J”
- Opportunities for students to become involved on campus

On each of the first four items, Magellan-funded students reported W&J exceeded their expectations at higher rates than students who have not received Magellan funding. On the last item, regarding opportunities to become involved, Magellan-funded students reported they were “Very Satisfied” at higher rates than students who have not received Magellan support.

Additionally, non-science majors were nearly twice as likely to report W&J exceeded their expectations of empowerment. And, regardless of g.p.a., study abroad experiences, or major, students who complete Magellan projects report they are “Very Satisfied” with W&J at higher rates than students who have not received Magellan funding.

We have also used Student Satisfaction Survey results to examine participation in senior class gift fundraising. We were pleasantly surprised to see there are relationships between general satisfaction, social satisfaction, and positive ratings of fraternity and sorority membership and the likelihood students will give \$10 or more to the senior class gift fund. While there are other factors that might explain some of these relationships, this finding was intriguing and has identified potential new programming and research areas.

Responding to Student Needs. The Student Satisfaction Survey enables us to be responsive to immediate student needs. The following changes have been made in direct response to student survey feedback:

- The College purchased a mini-bus for the Pittsburgh Pipeline, our Friday and Saturday evening shuttle service into Pittsburgh; an 11 passenger college van was being used previously and the new mini-bus seats 25
- Campus dining facilities have been kept open longer.
- The campus Rec Center is open later.
- New equipment for the campus Rec Center has been installed, including pieces frequently requested by students.

-- A "Salad by Design" station has been added to provide healthy options at our campus snack bar. Based on these and other similar changes, students themselves now credit the Student Satisfaction Survey as a tool for helping affect positive campus change.

We are very pleased with the Student Satisfaction Survey. We believe the Student Satisfaction Survey is an extremely useful assessment tool because it provides findings we can use to monitor student retention and learning and because it enables us to make quick improvements to campus life.