

2012-2013 General Education Assessment of Christian Understanding, Practices, and Affections (CUPA)

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I. CUPA Assessment: Overview, Contexts, Data Collection, Limitations

Context. Westmont's mission involves "serving God's kingdom by cultivating thoughtful scholars, grateful servants and faithful leaders for global engagement with the academy, church and world" (Mission Statement of Westmont College). The college "was incorporated for training in Christian work, the quickening of the missionary spirit and the publication of evangelistic and academic literature. According to its Statement of Faith, Westmont is 'committed to Jesus Christ and belonging to the worldwide evangelical tradition.'" (Articles of Incorporation and Statement of Faith as excerpted in its "Statement of Key Terms and Identity", 5 fn 1). Growing and maturing Christian understanding, practices, and affections (hereafter 'CUPA') has always been central to our mission and identity.

The college focused its institutional assessment efforts on the institutional learning outcomes that "graduates of Westmont College will *demonstrate literacy in biblical and orthodox Christian faith* (Christian understanding) and *demonstrate faithfulness in Christian service* (Christian practices and affections)."

Team members were Telford Work (Religious Studies), Lead Assessment Specialist; Russ Howell (Mathematics), Assessment Consultant at large; Maurice Lee (Religious Studies), Assessment Consultant in General Education; and Tim Wilson (Student Life), Assessment Consultant in Student Life. Tatiana Nazarenko, Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness, oversaw, organized, and supported our efforts throughout, and directed the Integration of Faith and Learning Faculty Roundtables project.

Data Collection. Toward this end, our team collected data from several sources.

1. Westmont participated in a thirteen-school "Christian Life Survey" and analysis coordinated through Taylor University's Center for Scripture Engagement. Of our population size of 1262, 502 students participated from across the classes of 2013-2016, for a 40% response rate.
2. A Lilly Fellows Program grant supported a Faith-Learning Faculty Roundtable project. The primary goals of this project included (a) deepening our understanding of student learning in relation to the established Christian Understanding and Christian Practices/Affections institutional learning outcomes, and (b) establishing a Faith-Learning Faculty Roundtable at Westmont as a venue for promoting pedagogical discussions and familiarizing the college community with the best practices of faith-learning on campus and beyond. The data for the faculty

roundtables was collected in Fall 2012; it was analyzed and used for two faculty roundtables in Spring 2013. The roundtables' participants developed two sets of recommendations pertaining to the tenure and promotion review; and for enhancing students' faith-learning across the curriculum.

3. One month before graduation, Westmont organized a survey of seniors. Of the 305 graduates-to-be, 76 participated, for a 25% response rate. They gathered at a special event to take the survey and instantly see and discuss the results.
4. After this meeting, 25 of these seniors attended one of five focus groups hosted by faculty or staff. They wrote brief responses to any one of several theological questions, then answered several questions orally.
5. To advertise that gathering, student passers-by were interviewed one morning on camera on an ad-hoc set of 'trivia' questions concerning the Bible, theology, Christian history, and Christian hymns commonly sung in chapel. The footage was compiled and edited into a twenty-minute video, a five-minute short version, and an 80-second trailer. Only the trailer was made available to seniors to advertise the survey and focus-group gathering, but they saw the five-minute version at the gathering and discussed their reactions. Faculty also saw the five-minute version at a later gathering and held a discussion of it and of the survey and focus group data.
6. Taylor University supplied statistical analyses of their study data; Tom Knecht of Westmont's political science department ran further statistical analysis to compare first-year students and seniors.

Limitations. Measuring Christian faith is already a debatable and controversial proposition, for "what human knows someone's thoughts except the human spirit within?" (1 Cor 2:11). Quantifying faith and commitment is even more problematic. One can measure the length and width of Jerusalem's temple (Ezek 40:3, Rev 11:1), but it is not exactly clear what such findings actually say about its mysterious inhabitant. Our team has gathered an abundance of verbal and numerical data, but we should not simply assume that they have penetrated into the hearts of our students. It is wise to hold any conclusions loosely.

Besides the mysterious nature of the object of our pursuit, ordinary heuristic limitations apply.

Questions administered across thirteen schools were heard and interpreted in thirteen different institutional and denominational contexts, where associations and the meanings of words can be shifted in subtle but crucial ways. Many of the questions were framed in Taylor University's setting, and not all of them are phrased in ways Westmont would consider ideal. The gain from being able to compare Westmont with other schools is worth the costs, however.

The Taylor survey's 40% response rate is considered reliable, and results were weighted according to biological sex and academic class. However, Taylor's guide to the survey demographics warns that "non-Christians [who number about 6.5% of respondents] were not asked most of the questions on the survey," and both the subject

matter and various methodologies of each survey in this report makes them all vulnerable to “non-response bias.”

The 25% response rate of the instant survey is less reliable, and focus groups are not to be considered representative, let alone a string of student responses when put on the spot on camera. Fortunately, each instrument in our analysis arrived at data that reinforces the others’. This grows our confidence in each instrument and data set.

Institutional learning outcomes state that students will “demonstrate literacy.” Instruments and rubrics were developed to evaluate theological and biblical literacy, or proficiency. However, proficiency can be tricky to uncover, even with a diversity of collection methods such as the multiple choice questions, oral discussions, and written answers used here. Moreover, it became clear that students’ proficiencies were diverse; some were more familiar with scripture, while others were more familiar with hymnody, and still others expressed their Christian commitment and experience in more ethical or relational ways.

Students interacted directly with the video, instant survey results, and of course the others in their focus groups, so our team had multiple opportunities to gauge what students thought of the data. We heard no protests, and only qualifications that are similar to our own.

II. What We Learned

The clearest indication of our shared expectations in these areas can be found in the document “What Do We Want from Our Graduates?” It specifies that “graduates of Westmont College should have a biblical and theological understanding and an appreciation of worship and spiritual formation that exceed what can be acquired at a secular university supplemented by campus Christian fellowships and active participation in a local church.”

Detailed analysis of our various findings is offered here in the appendices, as commentaries on each survey’s findings. In broadest perspective, we see:

- Low to middling overall biblical literacy. Students are somewhat familiar with Christian scripture, especially those bits that circulate most widely in churches and popular cultural consciousness. Some students attain higher biblical proficiency; however, there is a widespread and apparently well-founded sense that students are much less biblically literate than evangelicals were two generations or even one generation ago.
- Low to middling hermeneutical and theological proficiency, again concentrated on those theological claims and biblical interpretations that are most prominent in evangelical and wider culture. Some students attain a much higher level of sophistication, while at the other end of the spectrum others show a worrisome lack of sound theological judgment and knowledge.
- High and widespread Christian commitment. Roughly nine-tenths of students can appeal to credible visible evidence of their inward commitment, and nearly all see

the same in their fellow students. Students understand and express their faithfulness in largely relational and service-oriented ways.

- Similarity to other schools in the Taylor survey in all of these ways. However, Westmont students do differ from the thirteen-school average in some minor but consistent and important aspects.
- Liturgical facility and familiarity that is narrowly focused on students' own liturgical traditions. Students gain experience and fluency in worship practices while at Westmont, but remain comfortable as a rule only within their own inherited or adopted liturgical habits.
- Sustained and widespread engagement with the Christian faith in and out of the classroom. If we interpret these findings along the lines of James Marcia's four identity statuses of 'foreclosure,' 'identity diffusion,' 'moratorium,' and 'identity achievement,' levels of student (dis)comfort and commitment indicate progress within the necessarily lengthy process of responding to exposure to unfamiliar biblical, theological, ethical, and liturgical expressions of Christian faith.
- Improvement on all these measures as they progress through college. Students demonstrate advances in knowledge, literacy, proficiency, and commitment, and nearly all of them credit Westmont as contributing to that growth. Nevertheless, they lack the confidence that would best encourage them to grow through practice.
- Respect for biblical authority that has room to grow. However, students do exhibit higher respect for 'human' qualities such as historical and literacy context.
- High spiritual "thirst," unfortunately frustrated by disorientation through exposure to critical issues and multiple perspectives that can paralyze students from pursuing and frustrates those longings.

One student spoke for many in saying "we have learned a lot and forgotten a lot, and there is a lot we don't know."

III. Recommendations

It is premature to advance final recommendations before these findings are discussed at a number of different levels on campus. Until then, we have only suggestions to forward to those discussions:

1. For seniors asking sophisticated questions and developing their senses of theological judgment, an alternative chapel may provide the necessary forum. Gordon College seniors developed one on their own initiative. Westmont seniors might desire, for instance, a weekly alternative chapel in a location such as Porter Theater. This is a matter for the Campus Pastor's office's most direct consideration.
2. Advisers in the registration process could recommend that students delay taking RS GE courses while their biblical literacy and critical judgment develop.
3. Student Life is entertaining the prospect of student 'chaplains' to supplement RAs. Student leaders could be trained to lead substantive Bible studies by RS faculty, the Campus Pastor's office, Student Life, and the Dallas Willard Center. This preparation could be extracurricular or come in the form of an upper-division Religious Studies course, perhaps a practicum. One student mentioned that cultural expectations are

formed early; targeting these groups in Clark and Page dormitories would help inculcate a culture of biblical literacy to spread across classes over time.

4. Staff and faculty might benefit from efforts to grow their proficiency and confidence in fielding questions on biblical and theological matters. Students can interpret the spirit of deference to 'experts in RS' as legitimizing specialization and student non-expertise. Faith-learning and Westmont Institute might incorporate more biblical exposure; new faculty might audit RS GEs; the school might sponsor more continuing education like Helen Rhee's and Maurice Lee's presentation to Student Life in 2012-13.
5. The distance between expectations of the document "What Do We Want from Our Graduates?" and our results begs the question of whether true literacy and proficiency are realistic given students' prior exposure on arrival. At some point an academic curriculum cannot compensate for deficient formation in church, family, and personal time. There seems to be no additional room in the GE for additional coursework anyway. A campus-wide conversation is in order regarding Westmont's goals for graduates. It may involve revising that document in light of this year's work.
6. First-year students might be made aware of the problem and the challenge, and recruited to the task of remediation and growth.
7. Teaching an "incarnational," pneumatological framework for understanding the Bible might train students away from seeing the Bible's 'human' qualities over against, or in tension with, its 'divine' qualities.
8. The Religious Studies Department has been considering 'planting' campus traditions such as a Bible preaching or recitation tournament, 'Bible baseball' tournament (where players – perhaps representing dorms – score by answering factual Bible questions), and other events that would encourage biblical and theological exposure.
9. Faculty in all departments might consider whether 'critical thinking' is an inadequate category, since students perceive it as primarily involving deconstruction and skepticism. Labels such as 'cultivating sound judgment and wisdom' may come closer to capturing the spirit of the meaning of 'critical thinking.'
10. RS GEs might be sequenced in a predictable way to reduce disparity of student preparedness.
11. The Bible and theology might be more deeply (yet naturally) integrated into more of the curriculum and co-curriculum, beyond just RS courses and campus ministries. The ways this would be accomplished would be discipline-, department-, and course-specific, and department- and instructor-initiated.
12. The RS department might take up curricular design for RS GE courses, to distinguish what is considered 'essential' from what is 'important' and what is merely 'worthwhile.'
13. Across campus, the school could encourage a 'Bible-bringing' ("BYOB"?) culture where community members were expected to bring Bibles to chapel, dorm discussions of various issues, church, prayer, study groups, daily devotion, personal study, expository preaching, and the like. This is an expectation in some churches and schools but not others.

14. Majors might be encouraged to integrate matters of Christian identity and the relevance of Christianity more deeply into their seniors' major studies. One possible way to do this could be a reflective essay in the context of a capstone course.
15. Campus ministries and Serving Society courses might increase efforts to inform "Christian commitment" in more deeply theological and biblical ways, so that students' commitment is less likely to take its cues from superficially similar qualities in the wider culture.

Suggestions made at the Integration of Faith and Learning 04. 05.2013 and 05.17.2013 Faculty Roundtables:

1. Separate assessment of student faith-learning from the data collection for tenure and promotion decisions.
2. Separate the IFL questions and IDEA classroom evaluations. Create a timeline for administering the IFL questions. Decide who should be responsible for decision-making regarding the IFL questions administration.
3. Grant academic departments more freedom to decide in which courses to administer the IFL questions. Perhaps departments should develop prompts based on the Christian Understanding, Practices and Affections ILO's and their relevant PLO's. The college needs to decide whether we need a "standardized" set of IFL questions, which academic departments can adjust to their specific needs. We may consider using the following IFL questions across the curriculum: "How have you grown in your Christian faith as a result of the activities of this course?"; "How have you developed Christian practices, affections, and virtues as a result of taking this course? (Perhaps we could include examples of practices, affections, and virtues as part of the question); or "Westmont is a Christian Liberal Arts college. How does this course contribute to this?"
4. Create the inventory of the effective IFL curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities.
5. For future assessment of the integration of faith and learning, use a more automated data-collection system, which would be able to utilize analytical software.

IV. Appendices

- A. Institutional Learning Goals and Outcomes
- B. Taylor Survey Demographics
- C. Taylor Survey Summary Results
- D. Taylor Survey Comparisons of Means
- E. Taylor Survey Frequency and Percentage Distributions
- F. Taylor Survey Questions
- G. Taylor Survey Analysis
- H. Senior Instant Survey Questions
- I. April 2013 Focus Group Written and Oral Questions
- J. April 2013 Focus Group Proficiency Evaluation Rubric

- K. April 2013 Focus Group written answers
- L. April 2013 Focus Group leaders' notes
- M. Senior April 2013 Surveys Analysis
- N. The Integration of Faith and Learning data and analysis
- O. The Integration of Faith and Learning Questionnaire