Across the nation, institutions of higher learning are responding to the call for greater accountability with respect to student learning outcomes and the efficient use of human and financial resources. Institutional leaders who understand the importance of this call appreciate the need to work together to cultivate an organizational culture that embraces and values planning, assessment, and evidence-based decision-making.

Decisions about whether to add a new academic program or retire an existing one are based, in part, on whether the program advances the University’s mission. To that end, the assessment of student learning can provide valuable information on the effectiveness of academic programs. For centuries, colleges and universities have evaluated student learning primarily by using metrics such as course grades and graduation rates. While these metrics have been useful in the past, a new and different set of direct and indirect measures of student learning would evaluate not only academic programs, but institutional effectiveness as well.

The direct and indirect measures should encompass various aspects student learning. It is important to identify the types of evidence needed to make decisions about student learning to ascertain overall institutional effectiveness. Gathering such evidence requires the determination of which assessment tools would be most effective, along with the associated costs related assessment administration. Once the assessment of student learning results have been discerned, it is critical to pinpoint how those results will be used and by whom. It should also be established how institutional shortfalls in student learning will be addressed based on acquired results.

With respect to student learning at Howard University, we begin by asking, “What role will each constituent group – students, faculty, administrators, and staff -- play in creating, cultivating and maintaining a culture of evidence-based decision-making?”

From its first class of four students in May 1867 to its sesquicentennial class of approximately fifteen hundred students in August 2013, Howard University has continuously renewed the scope of its goals and mission. Throughout its long illustrious history, Howard University has evolved and reinvented itself in an effort to improve and concurrently serve its students. Its incipient goal of providing a “university for the education of negro youth in the liberal arts and sciences and other departments,” is ever expanding to reflect the growth of the university. Its since been cultivated to incorporate the pivotal aspects of not only providing a higher grade of education but also uplifting its students to succeed.

Today, the university is undergoing a period of revitalization and reinforcement, as mentioned in the President’s 2012-2013 annual report, “Expanding the Capstone,” furthering the evolution of Howard to develop a sharper “competitive advantage in the 21st Century.” With the addition of various resources including an Interdisciplinary Research Building and the implementation of academic renewal initiatives, the university will have begun paving a path towards a brighter new foundation by it’s 150th anniversary.


The 2014 administration of NSSE to the sesquicentennial class of Howard University will be accompanied with some changes to the survey itself. The reconstructed NSSE has transitioned from focusing on Benchmarks to Engagement Indicators and High-Impact Practices. The Engagement Indicators above provide valuable information regarding distinct aspects of the multi-dimensional nature of student engagement and are predictors of positive student learning outcomes. These Engagement Indicators have been separated into four themes, each of which highlight a distinct area of assessing student engagement. The theme Academic Challenge seeks to probe the students’ engagement in connecting ideas as well as the analyzing of those ideas in light of their own views and experiences. Learning with Peers highlights students’ experiences of engagement within diverse groups while working on course projects and assignments. Experiences with faculty examines the degree to which students interacted with faculty on activities outside classroom and how clear and organized the instructor’s teaching methods were while also addressing the degree to which students feel they were provided prompt and detailed feedback. The Campus Environment theme allows students to indicate the quality of their interactions with academic advisors, career services, student activities, financial aid and other campus offices and seeks to expose the students’ perspective on how much the institution provided support that fostered overall well-being as well as academic success.

The High-Impact Practices gauges students’ plans or past experiences prior to graduation with learning communities, internships, field-experience, study abroad programs, faculty-led research projects, Capstone experiences and service learning projects.

The 34th Annual Charles H. Thompson Lecture-Colloquium

On Wednesday, Nov. 6, 2012 in the West Ballroom of the Armour J. Blackburn University Center, the Charles H. Thompson Lecture-Colloquium Series hosted its Thirty-Fourth Annual Lecture with Dr. Ronald F. Ferguson as its keynote speaker. Dr. Ferguson earned an undergraduate degree from Cornell University and a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, both in economics. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Policy at the graduate School of Education at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and a senior research associate with the Wiener Center for Social Policy. He is also the creator of the Tripod Project for School Improvement, the faculty co-chair and director of the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University and faculty co-director of the Pathways to Prosperity Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Dr. Ferguson has served as an educator at Harvard University since 1983. For over three decades, Dr. Ferguson’s teaching, consulting and research have focused on reducing economic and educational disparities. His recent report, “Pathways to Prosperity,” added fuel to the national debate on how to help all youth, not just the college-bound, transition successfully from school to work. That concept also served as a major talking point in his keynote address during the Thompson Lecture-Colloquium.

The lecture entitled, “Elements of a 21st Century Movement for Excellence with Equity,” focused on educating students purposively to accommodate their skill types and appropriate paths instead of rigidly focusing on the traditional route to education. Dr. Ferguson placed weight on the idea that a student’s abilities can be shaped from an early age. Many individuals are involved in a child’s learning process that influence outcomes but parents and teachers play the most pivotal role. It is cardinal for both parties, parents and teachers, to remember the importance of maximizing love and minimizing stress factors in the learning process of developing a student’s abilities. Dr. Ferguson went on to introduce a measure of instructional quality used by the Tripod Project for School Improvement called the “Seven C’s.”

| **Seven C’s** |
|------------------|------------------|
| **Care**         | Pertains to teacher behaviors that help students to feel emotionally safe and to rely on the teacher to be a dependable ally in the classroom |
| **Captivate**    | Concerns teacher behaviors that make instruction stimulating, instead of boring. |
| **Confer**       | Concerns seeking students’ points of view by asking questions and inviting them to express themselves |
| **Clarify**      | Concerns teacher behavior that promote understanding. Interactions that clear up confusion and help students persevere are especially important. |
| **Consolidate**  | Concerns how teachers help students to organize material for more effective encoding in memory and for more efficient reasoning |
| **Challenge**    | Concerns both effort and rigor—pressing students to work hard and to think hard |
| **Control**      | Pertains to classroom management |

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Perceptions of Engagement in the 21st Century at Howard University

In lieu of the recent Charles Thompson Lecture with Dr. Ronald Ferguson, specific NSSE 2012 items that shared characteristics with some concepts mentioned in his lecture, “Elements of a 21st Century Movement for Excellence with Equity,” were selected to examine students perceptions of the institution. The items selected are: quality of students’ relationships with faculty members, and institutional impact on students’ ability to think critically and analytically. These items fall within the scope of the “Seven C’s” and align with Ferguson’s ideology of purposively equipping students with skills to prepare them to enter the world.

Quality of Relationships with Faculty Members

This first item encompasses the principles of the “Seven C’s” especially control, challenge and clarify, which Dr. Ferguson identified as the strongest predictors of learning. A majority of Senior student respondents generally felt more positively connected to faculty than their first year (FY) counterparts though over half of FYs responded with 5 or better.

Institutional Impact on Students’ Ability to Think Critically and Analytically

This last item speaks to the importance of emphasizing the thinking skills that prepare students to become professionals in the 21st century. Though seniors responded more favorably, overall most students in both groups responded positively to this item, indicating a strong institutional influence on students’ thinking abilities.