

## Assessment Day Focus Group Report – Assessment Day 2011

### Topic

What Makes a Good Classroom Learning Experience?

### Format

Four Focus Groups (2 consisting of freshmen and sophomores and 2 consisting of juniors and seniors) were held. Total number of participants was 67 and there were representatives from the following academic colleges at Marshall: COLA, COFA, COS, COHP, COEHS, CITE, LCOB, SOJMC, and RBA program.

### Major Themes that Emerged from the Groups

*Question: "What Makes a Good Classroom Learning Experience?"*

#### **1. Active Learning and Critical Thinking**

- Students use course content to engage in "hands-on" work, both inside and outside the classroom.
- Students apply knowledge through laboratory and other field experiences.
- Students learn through completing projects where they must find answers by doing research.
- Students and Professors engage in open discussions.
- Students and Professors interact with one another during the classroom experience.
- Students and Professors think through ambiguous problems.
- Students complete projects that have general guidelines, but allow enough latitude for them to develop new ideas and solutions.

#### **2. Instructor Characteristics**

- Professors are passionate and enthusiastic about the subject.
- Professors respect students.
- Professors communicate effectively with students – talk to them, not at them.
- Professors are organized.
- Professors are accessible to students – have "open door" policies.
- Professors relate course material to "real-life" situations.
- Professors help students discover their learning styles and use a variety of teaching methods, taking into consideration the variety of learning styles represented by students in their classes.
- Professors have high expectations for students and communicate those expectations to students.

#### **3. Effective Use of Assessment**

- Professors make students aware of each course's intended learning outcomes.
- Professors provide frequent feedback to students regarding their progress in each course.
- Professors allow students to learn from mistakes by providing corrective feedback.
- Professors seek feedback from students to help improve teaching methods.

- Professors encourage students to keep up with material by giving frequent quizzes.

### **Additional Issues**

Students did not feel that they learn effectively from what they considered to be an inappropriate use of PowerPoints. They were particularly critical of professors who put all their notes on PowerPoint and then simply stand in front of the class and read the information. They strongly suggested that PowerPoints be used for organizational purposes only. They stressed that they learn much more effectively when being required to take notes and to use information to complete projects and other classroom work.

Students stressed that multiple choice tests do not assess critical thinking and objected to their overuse in some general education classes.

Students opined that most of the instructional methods that encourage deeper student learning are best accomplished when class sizes are small.

Student requested that professors be asked to post grades in Blackboard as semester progresses, so that they will be able to gauge their progress.

### **Issues Specific to Freshmen**

Freshmen discussed the First Year Seminar (FYS) courses and had the following suggestions:

1. Organize FYS by major.
2. Standardize FYS to be sure critical thinking is at its core.
3. Relate FYS to life.
4. All students should take FYS first semester.
5. All FYS courses should teach students how to do library research.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

If I had to say there was a dominant theme, it was that we all learn best by doing, i.e. using new information in some sort of meaningful way. Another strong theme was that we learn by discovering information and answers to questions for ourselves.