



## Fall 2020 Report on Assessment

September 2020

### Executive Summary

The full report represents a departure from the standard format of the Fall assessment report to the Board of Regents. Typically, the Assessment Committee uses the Fall report to communicate results from institution-wide assessment surveys or instruments administered to students during the prior academic year. These instruments follow a three-year rotation. For 2019-20, the scheduled instrument was the HEDS (Higher Education Data Sharing) Consortium Research Practices Survey (RPS). However, in consulting with library staff, who were originally involved in the creation of the HEDS RPS and are the primary users of the data, we made the decision to discontinue this survey instrument.

Although there were not any scheduled institutional instruments administered last year, the Assessment Committee presents this report to update the Board on the wealth of other assessment-related activities that took place in 2019-20 and the many changes to assessment occurring at St. Olaf in the coming year. The full report describes findings from a Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium survey administered in response to the disrupted spring experienced as a result of COVID-19, department and program assessment described in their annual reports as well as the self-studies of departments/programs that underwent external program reviews in 2019-20, and updates on changes to St. Olaf's academic assessment program initially described in the Spring 2020 assessment report to the Board of Regents. Key points from each section are summarized below.

### HEDS COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt shift to remote teaching made by many institutions, the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium developed a COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey that institutions could use to gain feedback from students on the institution's response to the pandemic, students' worries and concerns, and their experiences with remote learning. St. Olaf administered this survey from April 24<sup>th</sup> to May 4<sup>th</sup> and received 1,465 responses (50% response rate).

#### *St. Olaf Student Responses Compared to Other Institutions*

In addition to St. Olaf, HEDS received responses from 33,097 students at 48 institutions. Compared to the average student responses from these institutions, St. Olaf students differed in the following ways:

- St. Olaf students reported less satisfaction with the school's response to the COVID-19 crisis than students at other schools. This was particularly true for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.
- Overall, St. Olaf students scored lower on the Student Worries Indicator scale than students at other schools, but this effect was driven primarily by white students. Black or African American students and international students at St. Olaf were more worried than Black or African American and international students at other schools.
- Despite worrying less often overall, St. Olaf students reported feeling greater stress about the potential consequences of the spread of COVID-19 than other students did.
- Domestic students of color, men, and seniors felt less connected to St. Olaf than these students did at other schools.
- The overall frequencies of St. Olaf students intending to return in the fall were similar to those seen at other schools.

#### *St. Olaf Students' Experiences with Remote Learning*

Students were also asked to describe the online instructional methods used after the switch to remote teaching that worked best/didn't work well and why.

- Students mentioned a wide variety of both synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods that they found effective.
- Students tended to prefer synchronous methods because they provided contact with faculty (particularly for help understanding course content) and other students and because they found these methods provided greater structure and engagement.
  - Students tended to struggle with these methods primarily when they experienced technology issues (e.g., poor WiFi) or scheduling constraints (e.g., time zone differences, balancing with other course scheduling demands, or new demands from their home life).
- Students tended to prefer asynchronous methods because they could complete the work on their own schedule and at their own pace, and because these methods were much less impacted by time zone or WiFi connection issues.
  - Students tended to struggle with these methods when there was too much independent learning and little interaction with faculty.

#### **Assessment in Program Review and Department/Program Annual Reports**

The full report summarizes assessment findings and responses to assessment from the four departments/programs that underwent external program reviews in 2019-20: Biology, Computer Science, Psychology, and Women's and Gender Studies.

In addition, the 2019-20 department and program annual reports asked chairs and directors to “describe any activities your department or program has undertaken this past year in assessment of student learning.” The most common assessment activity reported was indirect assessment of student learning (25% of departments/programs), followed by direct assessment of student learning (17%); 13% engaged in both. Seven departments’ and programs’ assessment plans were altered by COVID-19; nevertheless, three were still able to implement some type of assessment activity. Overall, these responses indicate that many departments and programs remained focused on assessing student learning and responding to their assessment findings, even in the absence of a college-wide academic assessment activity in 2019-20 due to the restructuring of our assessment cycle.

## **Changes to the St. Olaf Academic Assessment Program**

### *New Decennial Assessment Cycle for Departments and Programs*

In 2019-20 the Assessment Committee finalized plans for rolling out the new decennial assessment cycle. This new assessment cycle will follow individual departments’ and programs’ 10-year external program review cycle. The Assessment Committee worked to divide departments and programs into three groups based on the timing of their next external program review. The launch of the decennial assessment cycle happened at the September 17<sup>th</sup> Academic Leadership meeting. The Assessment Committee provided initial support to departments and programs during this meeting as they began to think about their decennial assessment plans and will continue to support development of these plans over the coming year.

### *General Education Assessment*

The development of Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for the new OLE Core general education curriculum led to broad involvement across the St. Olaf community (faculty, staff, and students), not only ensuring that we created ILOs that were meaningful and aligned with the goals of the OLE Core curriculum, but also keeping many engaged in important assessment work even in the absence of a campus-wide call for classroom-based assessment. Furthermore, this process was highly successful, with ILOs for fourteen of the sixteen OLE Core requirements passing by faculty vote in the Spring, despite the interruptions brought on by COVID-19. The remaining two passed a faculty vote at the September 3<sup>rd</sup> faculty meeting.

Another important, though not as broad, initiative involved a January workshop on direct assessment of student work, specifically research essays from first-year writing courses. The motivation behind this workshop was to pilot a method of direct assessment using student work samples as a potential new model for general education assessment. Faculty participants (2 Assessment Committee members along with 6 other faculty) found the experience to be a valuable professional development opportunity and appreciated the chance to discuss the benefits and challenges of scoring with a rubric and how this impacts equitable assessment of

“good” writing. Though the OLE Core ILOs for the first-year Writing & Rhetoric requirement had not been drafted at the time of the January workshop, the lessons learned from the experience will certainly inform the Assessment Committee as we continue conversations about assessment of not just Writing & Rhetoric but the OLE Core as a whole.

## **Future Assessment Activities**

The Assessment Committee will focus on the following priorities in the coming academic year:

- 1.** Designing a system for continual and (where feasible) direct assessment of student learning in the new OLE Core GE.
- 2.** Carefully monitoring the launch of the new decennial cycle by providing support and feedback for departments and programs as they begin drafting and implementing their decennial assessment plans.
- 3.** Ensuring all student-facing programs within the academic division are carefully and regularly assessed.