Liberal Arts Education Outcomes: Using Existing Data

by Anne Bost, Jenn Laskowski, Kelly Carter McDorman, and Jill Cellars Rogers

Please note that the assessment approach presented below is not intended to fully assess each desired outcome, but rather to begin to assess components of each outcome as made possible by a campus’s existing data.

Many schools administer one or more of the following surveys to their students:

- the College Student Survey (CSS)
- Your First College Year (YFCY)
- the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey
- the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
- the Higher Education Data Consortium (HEDS) Senior and Alumni surveys

Since these surveys are designed to gather demographic information as well as to provide an overall snapshot of students’ experiences in college, the instruments are not strictly focused on assessing outcomes. Nevertheless, the often “shelved” data from the surveys can provide a quick and cost-effective first glimpse into student outcomes. Schools can subsequently gather additional information to investigate desired outcomes in more depth.

The purpose of this article is to describe how one might use commonly administered surveys to assess students’ development in seven desirable liberal arts education outcomes. We will describe ways to connect these surveys to the following outcomes: Effective Reasoning and Problem Solving, Inclination to Inquire and Lifelong Learning, Integration of Learning, Intercultural Effectiveness, Leadership, Moral Reasoning, and Well-being. We do not intend these seven to represent the only desirable liberal arts educational outcomes. Nor do we believe these outcomes are limited to liberal arts education. They do, however, represent outcomes historically claimed for liberal arts education. The Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts is assessing these particular outcomes in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education.

Below you will find excerpts from common instruments that you could use to gain a first glimpse of the liberal arts education outcomes listed. Questions may deal with student experiences, student priorities, or more direct indicators of the outcome. For each instrument, we note the question numbers and year (where available) for the version we reference. For simplicity, the lists are restricted to the most relevant questions from each survey. Again, the approach presented here only provides a snapshot and should not be thought of as a comprehensive assessment.

Effective Reasoning and Problem Solving

College Student Survey (CSS) 2004

18. Compared with when you first started college, how would you now describe your:
   - Analytical and problem-solving skills
   - Ability to think critically

23. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   - Self confidence (intellectual)

Your First College Year (YFCY) 2004
9. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Self confidence (intellectual)

20. Compared with when you entered this college, how would you now describe your:
   • Analytical and problem-solving skills
   • Critical thinking skills

The CIRP Freshman Survey 2003

30. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Self confidence (intellectual)

33. Please indicate the extent to which each of the following describes you:
   • Engaging in self-reflection

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2003

2. During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following mental activities?
   b. Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory
   c. Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships
   d. Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions

11. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?
   e. Thinking critically and analytically
   f. Analyzing quantitative problems
   j. Learning effectively on your own
   m. Solving complex real-world problems

HEDS: The Senior Survey

11. Please indicate the extent to which your undergraduate experiences enhanced your ability to:
   • Acquire new skills and knowledge on my own
   • Think analytically and critically
   • Formulate creative/original ideas and solutions
   • Evaluate and choose between alternative courses of action
   • Plan and execute complex projects
   • Use quantitative tools (e.g., statistics, graphs)
   • Understand the process of science and experimentation
   • Function independently without supervision
   • Establish a course of action to accomplish goals

HEDS: Alumni Survey

1. Please indicate how important each of the following is in both your personal and professional life, and the extent to which each capacity was enhanced by your undergraduate experiences:
   • Acquire new skills and knowledge
   • Think analytically and critically
   • Formulate creative/original ideas
   • Function independently without supervision
   • Understand the process of science
3. To what extent did your undergraduate experience fulfill your original expectations in the following areas?
   - Enhance your intellectual growth

**Inclination to Inquire and Lifelong Learning**

**College Student Survey (CSS) 2004**

16. During the past year, how much time did you spend during a typical week doing the following activities?
   - Reading for pleasure

19. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   - Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts (acting, dancing, etc.)
   - Becoming an authority in my field
   - Making a theoretical contribution to science

23. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   - Drive to achieve
   - Initiative

**Your First College Year (YFCY) 2004**

9. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   - Drive to achieve

12. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   - Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts (acting, dancing, etc.)
   - Becoming an authority in my field
   - Making a theoretical contribution to science

13. Since entering college, how often have you felt:
   - That your courses inspired you to think in new ways

**The CIRP Freshman Survey 2003**

29. In deciding to go to college, how important to you was each of the following reasons?
   - To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas
   - To make me a more cultured person
   - To learn more about things that interest me

30. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   - Drive to achieve
   - Persistence

34. During the last year in high school, how much time did you spend during a typical week doing the following activities:
   - Reading for pleasure

**HEDS: Alumni Survey**

1. Please indicate how important each of the following is in both your personal and professional life, and the extent to which each capacity was enhanced by your undergraduate experiences:
   - Acquire new skills and knowledge
   - Formulate creative/original ideas
   - Appreciate arts/literature/music/drama
   - Gain in-depth knowledge of a field
   - Develop desire for continued learning
Integration of Learning

College Student Survey (CSS) 2004

7. Since entering college, indicate how often you:
   • Took interdisciplinary courses

9. Please rate your satisfaction with your current college in each area:
   • Relevance of coursework to everyday life

24. How often have professors at your current college provided you with:
   • An opportunity to apply classroom learning to "real-life" issues

Your First College Year (YFCY) 2004

24. Please rate your satisfaction with this institution on each of the aspects of campus life listed below:
   • Relevance of coursework to everyday life

The CIRP Freshman Survey 2003

33. Please indicate the extent to which each of the following describes you:
   • Appreciating the interconnectedness of everything

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2003

1. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?
   e. Included diverse perspectives in class discussions or writing assignments
   i. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions

2. During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following mental activities?
   e. Applying theories or concepts to practical problems in new situations

11. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?
   m. Solving complex real-world problems

HEDS: The Senior Survey

11. Please indicate the extent to which your undergraduate experiences enhanced your:
   • Ability to place current problems in historical/cultural/philosophical perspective

HEDS: Alumni Survey

1. Please indicate how important each of the following is in both your personal and professional life, and the extent to which each capacity was enhanced by your undergraduate experiences:
   • Ability to place current problems in perspective
Intercultural Effectiveness

College Student Survey (CSS) 2004

6. Since entering college have you:
   • Taken an ethnic studies class
   • Attended a racial/cultural awareness workshop
   • Had a roommate of different race/ethnicity
   • Participated in an ethnic/racial student organization
   • Participated in a study-abroad program

15. For the activities listed, please indicate how often you engaged in each during the past year:
   • Socialized with someone of another racial/ethnic group

18. Compared with when you first started college, how would you now describe your:
   • Foreign language ability
   • Knowledge of people from different races/cultures
   • Interpersonal skills
   • Ability to get along with people of different races/cultures
   • Understanding of the problems facing your community
   • Understanding of social problems facing our nation
   • Understanding of global issues

19. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   • Helping to promote racial understanding.

23. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Cooperativeness
   • Understanding of others

Your First College Year (YFCY) 2004

9. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Cooperativeness
   • Understanding of others

10. Since entering this college, how often have you:
    • Socialized with someone of another racial/ethnic group

12. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
    • Helping to promote racial understanding
    • Improving my understanding of other countries and cultures

20. Compared with when you entered this college, how would you now describe your:
    • Knowledge of people from different races/cultures
    • Ability to get along with others
    • Understanding of the problems facing your community
    • Understanding of national issues
    • Understanding of global issues

The CIRP Freshman Survey 2003

25. For the activities listed, indicate which ones you did during the past year, as well as how frequently you engaged in the activity:
    • Socialized with someone of another racial/ethnic group

30. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
    • Cooperativeness
    • Understanding of others
38. Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   • Helping to promote racial understanding
   • Improving my understanding of other countries and cultures

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2003

1. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following:
   e. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments
   u. Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own
   v. Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values

11. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?
   h. Working effectively with others
   l. Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds

HEDS: The Senior Survey

11. Please indicate the extent to which your undergraduate experiences enhanced your ability to:
   • Read or speak a foreign language
   • Relate well to people of different races, nations, and religions
   • Develop awareness of social problems

14. How often have you engaged in each of the following during your undergraduate program?
   • Discussions with students whose beliefs differ from yours

HEDS: Alumni Survey

1. Please indicate how important each of the following is in both your personal and professional life, and the extent to which each capacity was enhanced by your undergraduate experiences:
   • Read or speak a foreign language
   • Relate well to people of different cultures/races
   • Understand others

Leadership

College Student Survey (CSS) 2004

6. Since entering college have you:
   • Participated in leadership training.

7. Since entering college, indicate how often you:
   • Voted in a student election
   • Tutored another college student

9. Please rate your satisfaction with your current (or most recent) college in:
   • Leadership opportunities

15. For the activities listed, please indicate how often you engaged in each during the past year:
   • Performed volunteer work
   • Participated in organized demonstrations

16. During the past year, how much time did you spend during a typical week doing the following activities?
   • Volunteer work
17. What do you plan to be doing six months from now?
   • Doing volunteer work

18. Compared with when you first started college, how would you now describe your:
   • Leadership abilities

19. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   • Influencing the political structure
   • Influencing social values
   • Helping others who are in difficulty
   • Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment
   • Participating in a community action program
   • Helping to promote racial understanding
   • Keeping up to date with political affairs
   • Becoming a community leader

23. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Cooperativeness
   • Leadership ability
   • Self-understanding

Your First College Year (YFCY) 2004

9. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Leadership ability

10. Since entering this college, how often have you:
   • Performed volunteer work

12. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   • Influencing the political structure
   • Influencing social values
   • Participating in a community action program
   • Helping to promote racial understanding
   • Keeping up to date with political affairs
   • Becoming a community leader

20. Compared with when you entered this college, how would you now describe your:
   • Ability to work as part of a team

22. Since entering this college, how much time have you spent during a typical week doing the following activities?
   • Volunteer work

The CIRP Freshman Survey 2003

25. For the activities listed, indicate which ones you did during the past year, as well as how frequently you engaged in the activity:
   • Performed volunteer work
   • Voted in a student election

30. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Cooperativeness
   • Leadership ability
   • Self understanding

34. During the last year in high school, how much time did you spend during a typical week doing the following activities?
   • Volunteer work
38. Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   • Influencing the political structure
   • Influencing social values
   • Helping others who are in difficulty
   • Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment
   • Participating in a community action program
   • Helping to promote racial understanding
   • Keeping up to date with political affairs
   • Becoming a community leader

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2003

1. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following:
   j. Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)

7. Which of the following have you done or do you plan to do before you graduate from this institution?
   b. Community service or volunteer work

11. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?
   h. Working effectively with others
   i. Voting in local, state, or national elections
   k. Understanding yourself
   o. Contributing to the welfare of your community

HEDS: The Senior Survey

7. When thinking about a career, how important to you is each of the following considerations:
   • Work for social change
   • Leadership potential

11. Please indicate the extent to which your undergraduate experiences enhanced your ability to:
   • Function effectively as a member of a team
   • Lead and supervise tasks and groups of people
   • Understand myself (abilities, interests, limitations, and personality)

12. Which of the following did you participate in during college?
   • Leadership training

13. In which years, during college, did you actively participate in any of the following:
   • Student government
   • Volunteer service

15. During your senior year how much time did you spend per week, on average, on the following:
   • Volunteering

HEDS: Alumni Survey

1. Please indicate how important each of the following is in both your personal and professional life, and the extent to which each capacity was enhanced by your undergraduate experiences:
   • Understand myself
   • Function independently without supervision
   • Lead and supervise tasks and groups of people
   • Function effectively as a member of a team
6. Please evaluate each of the following undergraduate activities for your level of involvement while an undergraduate. For those activities in which you were involved, please evaluate the contribution of each activity to your personal or professional life after graduation.
   - Community service
   - Political organization or club

13. To what extent have you voluntarily participated in the following organizations since graduating from your alma mater:
   - Civic/community
   - Political
   - Service (e.g., Rotary, Kiwanis)

Moral Reasoning

College Student Survey (CSS) 2004

19. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   - Helping others who are in difficulty
   - Developing a meaningful philosophy of life

Your First College Year (YFCY) 2004

12. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   - Helping others who are in difficulty
   - Developing a meaningful philosophy

The CIRP Freshman Survey 2003

33. Please indicate the extent to which each of the following describes you:
   - Searching for meaning/purpose in life
   - Being honest in my relationships with others

38. Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   - Helping others in difficulty
   - Developing a meaningful philosophy of life

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2003

11. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?
   n. Developing a personal code of values and ethics

HEDS: The Senior Survey

7. When thinking about a career, how important to you is each of the following considerations:
   - Expression of personal values

11. Please indicate the extent to which your undergraduate experiences enhanced your ability to:
   - Understand moral and ethical issues

HEDS: Alumni Survey

1. Please indicate how important each of the following is in both your personal and professional life, and the extent to which each capacity was enhanced by your undergraduate experiences:
   - Understand moral/ethical issues
Well-being

College Student Survey (CSS) 2004

9. Please rate your satisfaction with your current (or most recent) college in each area:
   • Relevance of coursework to everyday life
   • Interaction with other students

15. For the activities listed below, please indicate how often you engaged in each during the past year:
   • Smoked cigarettes
   • Felt lonely or homesick
   • Felt depressed
   • Felt overwhelmed by all I had to do

18. Compared with when you first started college, how would you now describe your:
   • Interpersonal skills

19. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
   • Developing a meaningful philosophy of life

21. Since entering college, how successful have you been in:
   • Getting to know faculty
   • Developing close friendships with other students

23. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Emotional health
   • Physical health
   • Self confidence (social)
   • Understanding of others

Your First College Year (YFCY) 2004

8. Since entering this college, how successful have you felt at:
   • Getting to know faculty

9. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Emotional health
   • Physical health
   • Self confidence (social)
   • Understanding of others

10. Since entering this college, how often have you:
    • Smoked cigarettes
    • Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do
    • Felt depressed

12. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
    • Develop a meaningful philosophy of life

13. Since entering college, how often have you felt:
    • Lonely or homesick
    • Unsafe on this campus
    • Worried about your health

20. Compared with when you entered this college, how would you now describe your:
    • Ability to get along with others
    • Ability to work as part of a team
The CIRP Freshman Survey 2003

25. For the activities listed, indicate which ones you did during the past year, as well as how frequently you engaged in the activity:
   • Smoked cigarettes

30. Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age:
   • Emotional health
   • Physical health
   • Self confidence (social)
   • Understanding of others

33. Please indicate the extent to which each of the following describes you:
   • Searching for meaning/purpose in life

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2003

8. Mark the box that best represents the quality of your relationships with people at your institution:
   a. Other students
   b. Faculty members
   c. Administrative Personnel and Offices

11. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?
   h. Working effectively with others

HEDS: The Senior Survey

11. Please indicate the extent to which your undergraduate experiences enhanced your ability to:
   • Function effectively as a member of a team
   • Understand myself; abilities, interests, limitations, and personality
   • Establish a course of action to accomplish goals
   • Develop self-esteem

HEDS: Alumni Survey

1. Please indicate how important each of the following is in both your personal and professional life, and the extent to which each capacity was enhanced by your undergraduate experiences:
   • Function effectively as a member of a team
   • Understand others

3. To what extent did your undergraduate experience fulfill your original expectations in the following areas?
   • Foster your personal growth
   • Promote your ability to form relationships