

Preparing for Your Spring 2010 Wabash National Study Assessment Sessions

This document combines information from a variety of sources on approaches to a major assessment project like the Wabash National Study. Included are insights from Susie Pappas at ACT and staff at the Center; insights from WNS contacts who have had very successful return rates; and information from other sources including the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), and other colleagues. This is a collection of examples and suggestions, not mandates. You know your campus culture and what will and will not work. We simply want to provide resources and as much information as possible to try to make this easier for you, because in our experience over the last three years of the study, getting students to participate in the assessment sessions is often much more difficult than originally thought. However, we think the effort is worthwhile because you will receive more useful information about your students when more students participate. Greater returns will allow us to cut the data in more ways so that we can do specific analyses and investigate particular questions that are important for your campus. This might mean looking at students in different majors or programs, comparing athletes and non-athletes or students in Greek organizations with those who are not, or whatever other distinctions matter to you. In the end, the more students who participate in this final assessment session, the more flexibility we have in terms of institutional analyses and the more we can help you identify where and how students are learning at your institution. Our goal continues to be to make the study as useful as possible for your campus, and we provide these suggestions in that spirit.

Recently, Susie Pappas said, “Getting a good turnout is a combination of convenient scheduling (for students, not staff), campus support, extensive and varied communications, the right incentives, hard work and follow-up, and luck with the weather!” We cover all of these issues (except the weather) and more in this document:

- **Spreading information about the study, results, and sessions on campus**
- **Gaining campus support for the assessment from all necessary people**
- **Advanced organization and planning**
- **Best scheduling options**
- **Incentives and appeals**
- **Communicating with participants**

We hope you find this information helpful as you start to prepare for your fourth-year WNS assessments!

Spreading information about the study, results, and sessions on campus

I recently spoke with the On-Campus Coordinators for the study at several schools with successful spring assessments to see what factors contributed to their success. I spoke with representatives from Augustana College, North Carolina A&T State University, Oxford College of Emory University and the University of Rhode Island. Satu Riutta at Oxford College says that the key to their very successful spring return (88%) was that everyone on campus—faculty, staff, and students—knew about the study. They knew the details of the study, including information about the upcoming sessions, and also knew why it was important to the campus. Satu discussed the study and its importance as well as the details of the spring sessions during a faculty meeting and in many face-to-face meetings around campus.

Similarly, Scott Simkins and Karen Hornsby of North Carolina A&T State University (N.C. A&T) believe that part of their success was publicizing and discussing the Wabash study and data from the first year with many campus constituencies. If that is an important consideration at your campus, you can use the fall term to publicize the study to build interest as you head toward the spring assessment sessions. For example, Tim Schermer of Augustana College said they built support for the study by having a WNS session at their faculty retreat and talking about the study in their faculty conversation series. This helped them with their in-class administration of the study.

Gaining campus support for the assessment from all necessary people

The above efforts of spreading the word about the study to campus constituencies can help you when you need your colleagues and students to assist with organizing, staffing, and advertising the spring sessions. N.C. A&T said that the commitment and investment of the main campus organizers of the study (the OCCs) was very important for them, but wasn't sufficient. Oxford College said that it was important that they had the support of the campus leaders, and that those leaders not only knew the general importance of the study, but they knew the details of their spring sessions, the incentives, etc. and were encouraging everyone on campus to support the effort. Specifically, you might consider the following:

- If you want to offer additional incentives, communicate with the key people early. For example, if you want to offer a bookstore discount, it will be important to work closely with the bookstore staff to figure out the details.
- N.C. A&T shared the names of eligible students with the faculty they were taking classes from and asked the faculty members to encourage participation. You could consider a similar approach.
- If you want to do the assessments during class, it will help to enlist the support of your dean or provost as well as the faculty teaching the classes, and communicate with them about the possible benefits. At Augustana College, they administered part of the assessments in class, and they suggest being detailed in your communications with faculty if using class time for the study. They helped guide faculty on how to explain the process and encourage participation. For example, they suggested that faculty not unnecessarily emphasize the voluntary aspect of the study.

These efforts may seem overwhelming, but they can have other benefits. Jo Beld, Director of Evaluation and Assessment at St. Olaf College, who talked about St. Olaf's experience with the CLA said,

The recruitment effort was in and of itself a means of engaging many sectors of the College in the work of assessment. The CLA project was discussed at several Student Government Association meetings and many faculty members learned about it as we sought their help in recruitment. Having invested in the recruitment effort, these faculty are also invested in what we learn from the project. Equally significant, many staff were engaged in the recruitment effort and learned about assessment in the process; the Dean of First Year Students, the residence life staff, the College bookstore, and the Information and Instructional Technology staff were particularly involved. Arguably, and however unintentionally, CLA recruitment proved to be a means of building a campus culture committed to assessment. (from a personal document dated January 2007)

Advanced organization and planning

Our number one piece of advice—from the Center, from Susie, and from all of our WNS school contacts—is to start the planning process as early as you can. Scott Simkins at N.C. A&T said he took the attitude that every student counted, and he put in a lot of extra effort to get more students. One specific suggestion N.C. A&T offers that might help you is for the key people organizing the study, such as the OCC, to clear time on their calendars, to the extent possible, during the assessment period so they can attend sessions to handle questions and problems, hold extra sessions, make calls, send emails, have students come to their office to complete the study, etc., if needed. One of the first planning details to attend to is to get up-to-date student information as soon as possible:

- Who is still enrolled? (all students who took the assessments in the fall of 2006 are eligible to participate again, regardless of whether they took the second assessment in spring 2007)
- Current email addresses (the addresses actually used by students, not necessarily their school accounts)
- Cell phone numbers
- Names of advisors—to help communicate with students about sessions
- Fall and spring course schedules—to help get faculty support for recruiting students and perhaps even for using class time for the assessments.

ACT will ask for students' current contact information in October.

Best scheduling options

Both our WNS schools and other sources say that embedding assessments in classes is one of the best options for ensuring high return rates. The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) says having seniors take assessments in senior seminar or capstone courses or other senior courses is effective. They also encourage making it part of a course requirement or offering extra credit in upper-level courses (CIC, 2008). Similarly, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) says that embedding it into courses or other school activities, or mandating that all students participate are effective ways to ensure participation (“Spring 2009 CLA Administration Manual – Longitudinal,” 2009, p.7). Both N.C. A&T and Augustana had great success doing at least part of the assessments in classes.

Augustana embedded its second assessment in required classes. Prior to the scheduled class day for the assessments, the faculty passed out the packets with the NSSE, the Student Experiences Survey, and the Student Assessments (which combines the four shorter outcome measures). Students returned these on the class day scheduled for the assessment. During class time, the students completed the DIT or CAAP. Before students left the class, the proctor checked to see if they had completed the take-home parts. If not, they were asked to sit down and finish it at that time (since the DIT or CAAP did not typically take the entire class time).

If embedding the assessments in a course is not a good option for your campus, here is some advice for out-of-class assessments. Oxford College held sessions on four consecutive evenings. This worked well for them because even with conflicts, with that many consecutive sessions, students could find a time to come. N.C. A&T and the University of Rhode Island (URI) found that holding numerous assessment sessions at various times of day and various days of the week worked well. URI said that evenings were most popular, but all sessions were important in getting an overall good return rate.

From their perspective, having a morning session that only gets three students or even having a one-on-one session in their office was still important. Similarly, N.C. A&T says that flexibility and persistence were important for them. For example, at N.C. A&T, if a student missed a portion of the in-class administration and therefore had an incomplete packet, someone called or emailed the student and set up a time for him or her to come to the office to finish it.

Augustana believes that doing everything but the DIT or CAAP as a take-home worked well because students only needed to attend a shorter (one-hour) sit-down session. This can be enhanced by asking someone the students work with regularly to hand out and collect the packets. For example, for seniors, using their advisors or someone teaching a senior-level class in the major might work well.

Finally, here are some general things to keep in mind regarding scheduling:

- Consider having follow-up contact procedures and make-up session details worked out ahead of time, but don't publicize them. If they aren't needed, great. But if they are, you can quickly activate your make-up plan.
- Try to schedule the initial sessions early enough so that there is time to regroup if turnout is poor.
- Consider connecting the assessment sessions with some other graduation-related events, such as a meeting of the senior class or checkout procedures.

Incentives and appeals

In terms of incentives, the most important thing to remember is that every student who takes the assessments will receive \$50 in compensation. You might want to consider how to work that into your communication and advertising plans.

If you want to add to that incentive, here are some suggestions that are particularly relevant for seniors:

- Rebates toward senior fees/cap and gown fees (CIC, 2008.)
- A set number of free transcripts (J. Beld, personal document, 2007)
- A college bookstore discount for one day (J. Beld, personal document, 2007)

Other possible incentives include:

- Course extra credit
- Gift certificates
- College paraphernalia (T-shirts, etc.)

In our colleagues' experiences, the most important thing if you want to use incentives beyond the \$50 is to figure out what would appeal to your students. URI had a great return rate in spring 2009 with their first-year students. They think this is all due to the right incentive. They offered early registration for the next term's classes for participating students. Given that it is often hard to get into high-demand classes at URI, this was a great incentive. Therefore, their advice is to figure out a compelling reason for students to participate.

You might also think about how to appeal to your students beyond incentives. Jo Beld (personal document, 2007) says that values-based appeals are more effective with seniors. Seniors, she says, have a greater affinity for the nonmaterial benefits of participating in something like the CLA or, in our

case, the WNS. Beld asked seniors why they chose to complete the CLA and thirty-one percent said “belief in the project or in the value of participating in research surveys.” Similarly, Susie Pappas thinks appeals to your students' campus loyalty/citizenship can be more effective for seniors than they were for first-year students.

Communicating with participants

Many of you used ACT to send letters and emails to your participants in the first year of the study. ACT is prepared to do similar communications with your students this year. However, we think there are more effective ways to communicate with students. Based on our experience over the last three years, we believe it is best for communication to participants regarding the study to come directly from the institution.

Thus, we encourage you to develop a communication plan early. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Personalize your correspondence with participants (“Spring 2009 CLA Administration Manual,” 2009, p.8)
 - avoid “dear student” salutations
 - avoid multiple recipient addresses/listserv origin for emails
- Keep messages brief
- Inform participants of various ways to respond or get additional information such as email, phone, etc.
- Emphasize the benefits of participation (“Spring 2009 CLA Administration Manual,” 2009, p.8)
 - Oxford College emailed participants who had yet to take the assessments after every session with the names of students who won incentives to encourage other students to attend (see attached document, *Example 1*). You could do this with the \$50 incentive by sending out a message that says something like, “Did you know that 20 of your classmates earned \$50 last night? You can too—just go to . . .”
- Think about who should send messages
 - Oxford College had multiple people throughout the college communicating the same message about the study and assessment sessions—professors, advisors, staff, other students, etc. (See attached document, *Example 2*).
 - N.C. A&T suggests having correspondence come from campus leaders that your students will know and respond to. The CLA similarly says students are more likely to respond to messages from people they know and respect. Think about advisors, instructors, department heads, student leaders, and/or thesis advisors (See attached document, *Example 3*).
- Get students involved in communication efforts. Examples:
 - N.C. A&T says they had great success by getting students such as fraternity and sorority leaders, student government leaders, and the like involved in recruiting. Try to make it a goal of the class to have a good participation rate.
 - Ask students what would appeal to them and how best to communicate with them.
 - Well-known seniors who are WNS participants could help you advertise. They could send out emails, text messages, Facebook updates, etc., saying something like, “I am going to the WNS session tonight and earning \$50 for my time. You should come as well!”

- Consider having competitions among living units, fraternities, sororities, and/or other organizations to see who gets the highest percentage of completed assessments, and give the winning organization an appealing prize.
- Be creative—think about unique avenues on your campus, and beyond, that you can use to advertise. Examples:
 - Consider advertising on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/advertising/>). Will Searle, an institutional researcher at Cornell University, used Facebook ads to recruit undergraduates to take an online survey. You can target your ad not only to those who have joined your institution's network, but you can even target by class year. Ads are very affordable. Cornell's costs averaged about \$9 per day during their survey.
 - Oxford College used table tents in the dining halls with catchy information such as "Top 10 reasons to take the WNS" (see attached document, *Example 4*).
- Show participants how you have used the initial data and how you plan to follow up on the data.
 - Oxford College told students what they had done with previous data to help build a culture of assessment.
 - N.C. A&T emphasized that they knew the students' time was valuable and they would use the data to improve the institution.
- Finally, think about how you will follow up with those who don't attend your sessions.
 - Continue to send email reminders as long as sessions are scheduled.
 - Follow up with missing participants after each session.

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Scott Simkins, Director of Academy for Teaching and Learning at North Carolina A&T State University, telephone conversation, July 15, 2009).

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