

# Th'Ink Well

## Center for Teaching Excellence

*An occasional Newsletter from the Center for Teaching Excellence*

### ❖ From the Director

Welcome to *Th'Ink Well*, a digest of news and ongoing discussions about academic life at William Paterson University. Our current issue focuses on levels of academic challenge, one of the sets of factors and conditions that contribute to student engagement and success. It highlights selected findings from the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement, and shares student and faculty insights on teaching practices that seem to promote high levels of challenge at WPUNJ.

Next year *Th'Ink Well* will elaborate further the present discussion. It will examine the contrasting perceptions of students and faculty reported by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). It will also explore the extent to which our students engage in activities that require higher-order cognitive skills, and share educational practices that foster student engagement and success.

We invite you to join us again in the fall of 2009 and wish you a pleasant summer.

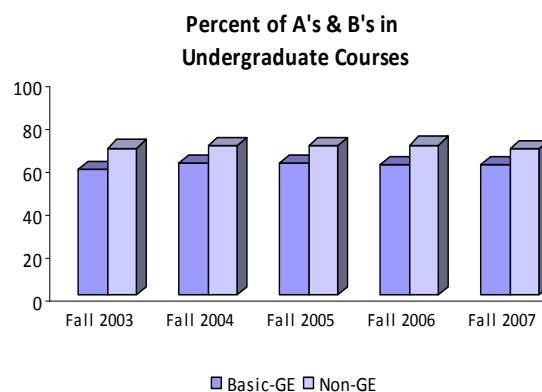
### ❖ Levels of Academic Challenge at WPUNJ

*Maria Villar*

At the end of every academic year I ask myself, how effective and successful was my teaching? Was I able to engage students and touch them in meaningful ways? Did I set and hold students to high expectations? And equally important, did I provide

appropriate levels of support? These are not easy questions to answer not only because I lack precise tools to assess 'engagement,' but because we teach a very diverse student body at WPU. In most of my classes, a bimodal grade distribution is the norm. Can I challenge and support them all?

Yet if one judges student support and achievements from grading outcomes, WPUNJ seems to be excelling on this front. According to the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment (<http://ww2.wpunj.edu/ira/FACTBOOKS/FB08/T4.1.pdf>), about two-thirds of our students earn A's and B's in lower and upper-level classes every fall.



Do such performance outcomes reflect the high quality of our educational practices or the failure to set and hold students to high expectations?

The NSSE offers a guide to examine educational practices that contribute to

student satisfaction and achievement in college. The NSSE clusters important student behaviors and educational factors related to desired outcomes of college into five conceptual categories. These clusters are academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experience and supportive campus environment. These are aspects and conditions that work together to enhance student engagement and success in high-performing schools.

In the following sections we will present selected findings from the 2008 NSSE Report. Because there are many factors that enhance or detract from student engagement, learning, and achievement, we will explore a few pertaining to levels of academic challenge at WPUNJ. The goal is to ask, what are we *not* doing that we should?

❖ **Level of Academic Challenge & 2008 NSSE Peer Comparison Institutions**  
*Jane Zeff*

Benchmarking studies are familiar tools used by organizations such as colleges to compare performance indicators across a set of similar organizations. Benchmarking studies help achieve institutional improvement by placing findings in a larger context so that strengths and weaknesses can be identified and resources and programming efforts can be focused on improving areas of concern and maintaining areas of excellence.

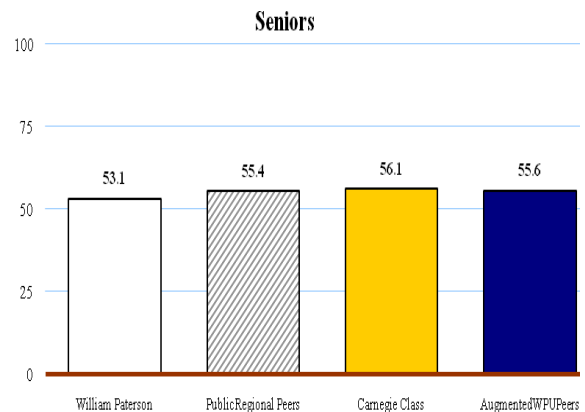
The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is one of the benchmarking study in which William Paterson participates. Responses from about 42 of the survey questions first-year students and seniors are asked are used to produce five benchmark scores which capture a wide range of educational practices and conditions associated with high levels of student engagement.

NSSE includes the benchmark Level of Academic Challenge (LAC) because

“challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. College and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.”

The benchmark scores for seniors are illustrative. William Paterson's mean LAC benchmark score is 53.1 and peer scores are 55.4 for public regional colleges, 56.1 for those in our Carnegie classification (master's large), and 55.6 for the 'augmented' self-defined peer group. Our senior benchmark score is lower than our peers and differences are statistically significant so we probably want to see if the answers to the individual questions making up the benchmark give us some ideas for next steps.

**2008 Level of Academic Challenge (LAC)**

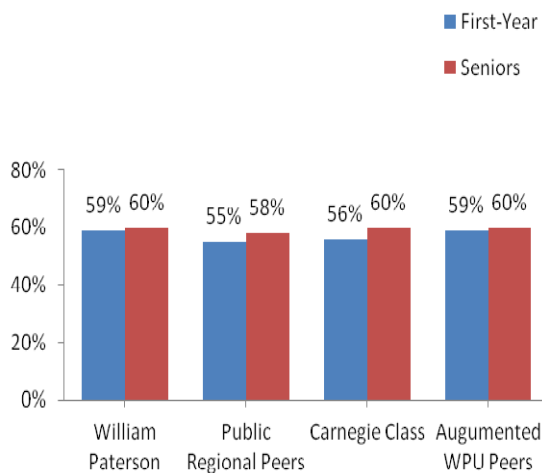


Below are some graphs from the last CTE discussion group that look at some of the answers to these questions.

## ❖ Level of Academic Challenge & the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement

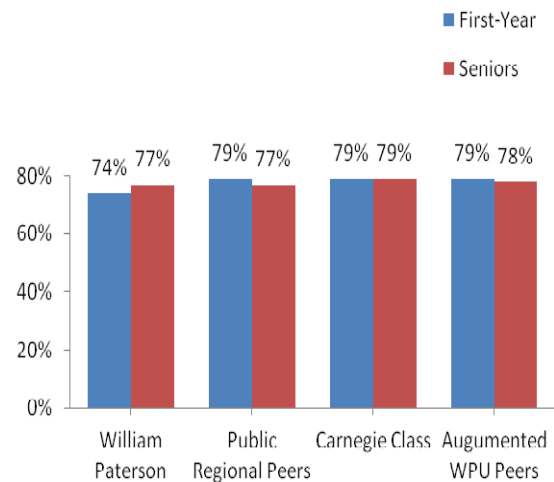
Universities that emphasize the importance of academic effort and set high expectations for student performance promote higher levels of student achievement. NSSE student responses to the following set of questions offer us a glimpse of how students perceive academic expectations and efforts at WPUNJ.

**How frequently did you work harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations?**



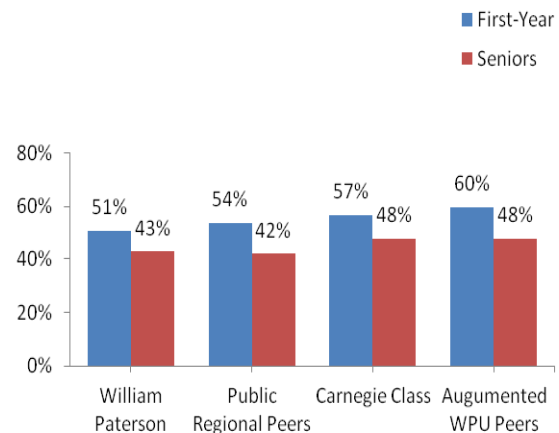
**Percent of students who answered often or very often displayed**

**Extent to which your examinations challenged you to do your best work?**



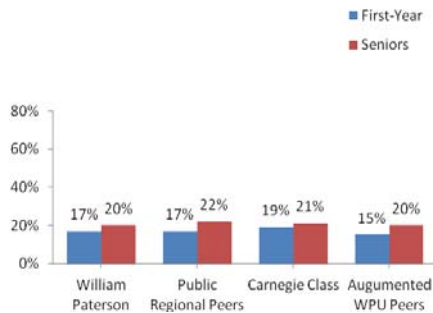
**Percent of students who answered quite challenged**

**How frequently did you prepare two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in?**



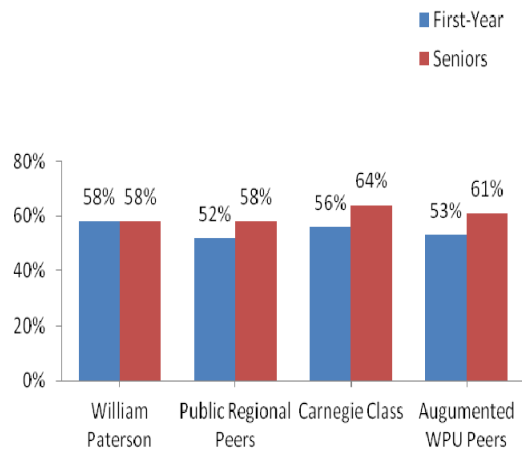
**Percent of students who answered often or very often displayed**

**How frequently did you come to class without completing readings or assignments?**



**Percent of students who answered often or very often displayed.**

**How frequently did you receive prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on academic performance?**



**Percent of students who answered often or very often displayed**

### Insiders' Views

A few weeks ago during an advisement session, a major mentioned that he was taking a superb course this Spring. "I have never been challenged as much in a class. It makes me think in ways I had never thought," he added. I could not resist asking, "Who teaches this class?" Soon afterwards I contacted this colleague. The insights he offers below are very similar to the insights offered by a recent graduate

who excelled in the Honors program. Both stress the importance of building connections with the real world and students' interests, and promoting more meaningful student-faculty contact.



### **A Faculty Voice \* Dr. Mark Ellis, Sociology**

*A few years ago I had the opportunity to learn from one of my colleagues from the College of Education on the characteristics of millennial students. I learned that I had to be exact and clear. I also understood that I should use the computer to connect with their thought processes and interests.*

*In my Principles of Sociology course in Spring 2009, I used most of my pedagogical tools as usual while taking our students into account. In the past, at the end of class, I would have students write down one to two things they learned and one to two things that they wanted clarification on. At the beginning of the next class, I would start off with a summary of the most recurring themes in these end-of-class statements. I have found that this is still not enough, so now I try to build connections by sending my reflections from class to them.*

*In the evening of the same day of class, I email students my "reflections or thoughts from class." For example, one day in class we talked about perspectives and trying to define sociology and how sociology is an amalgamation of several behavioral sciences. I used the example of a bridge. In order to build a bridge you need the perspectives of biologists, geologists, physicists, and so on. From there we*

*discussed the limitations of perspectives and how perspectives and academic disciplines are related. That evening I went home and sent an email with a youtube.com video clip of Eva Cassidy singing "Bridge over Troubled Waters." The next class I asked them who Eva Cassidy is. Some looked puzzled and others raised their hands and blurted out, "She's the singer from the email." I asked them why I selected that song. From there, we recapped the previous lecture. The students with the puzzled looks on their faces asked what we were talking about and I filled them in. I told them that I would be sending out such reflections from class in emails from time to time and that they would not be on the exam.*

*As the semester progressed, some students would say, "Hey, you didn't send out a thought for the day email." They like music video clips. To them, it is perhaps a glimpse into me beyond just the lecturer they see in class. One student said her mother looks forward to the video list and that they both watch them. I have to say that the evening email has encouraged more students to read their campus email. Students have also looked in Blackboard for paper assignments and have reported that they might be interested in taking an online course.*

*In trying this out this semester, I know that I have them tuned in. Some students have come up to me and said comments like, "Good song choice, I would have chosen X, let's see what song you pick tonight based on this lecture" and so on. I know that millennial students listen and hear in different ways even though the messages are timeless. Our challenge is to learn what new skills we must add to our pedagogical tool kits to build intellectual connections.*

### **A Student Voice \* Honors Alumni**

*The most important experiences during my time at WPU were the ones that presented a true challenge and forced me to engage with my subject of study on a much deeper level than just coursework. For example, writing a research paper and presenting it at the senior capstone seminar and working on*

*a substantial independent thesis were two experiences that not only gave me a true*



*taste of the difficulties that research presents but also helped prepare me for graduate study. Another example was a project I participated in which introduced students to the applied aspect of my discipline, assignments that forced me to go out and actually do what I was learning about. It is those moments, when I was able to take my learning beyond the classroom, that were critical in my education.*

*What made those experiences even more enriching and what I take advantage of and cherish even as an alumni, are the wonderful relationships that I forged with my professors. The hours I spent in their offices talking about research ideas and ongoing projects, about their own work, or even about the challenges of a project or class were probably the most valuable aspect of my education. The individual attention that I was able to receive from faculty members and their engagement with my ideas and work were indispensable in developing my skills and building a sense of confidence in my abilities, something that if lacking can truly weigh on a student's success.*

*I wished the University at large placed more emphasis on offering students more opportunities to experience what they are learning. This is especially important for students who have ambitions to pursue graduate study or academic careers. It is those experiences more than exams and lectures that truly prepare students for the path they will embark on after graduation.*