

Assessment of Student Learning

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Focus on Learning

By Rollin Abernethy, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs

What is it we do at UW that is not directly or indirectly learning? And yet, in my career the emphasis on learning in our everyday vocabulary has only recently become prominent. For a variety of reasons higher education is paying increased attention to outcomes, and learning in particular. Teaching, research, and service have long been at the core of the academic appointment, but what about learning? Well, President Buchanan asked us to recast how we think about this core in his fall 2006 Convocation: *Teaching and Learning, Research and Creativity, Service and Leadership*. I maintain that “learning” is required for us as individuals and as an institution if we are to achieve our full potential in each of these core elements. As defined by Webster, learning is “to acquire knowledge or skill or a behavioral tendency by study, instruction, or experience.” For most of us the synonym discovery, “to find out something not previously known to one,” is fundamental to us as academics; it is our *raison d’être*. And in fact many of us, and our students, learn most effectively by discovery on our own terms.

Virtually every UW academic program now has defined learning outcomes. These outcomes are the knowledge, skills, and abilities students should have acquired as a graduate of the program. With this formal acknowledgement of our desired outcomes, a commitment to maximize opportunities for our students to achieve those outcomes should follow. The point I hope to make is straightforward, we are learners and we want our students to be learners. We have long paid attention to student learning in courses, but to a lesser extent at the program level. Our assessment plans can be thought of as tools to support and extend our understanding of our students’ learning. Starting this spring and over



the next year, each of us will have a role in creating Academic Plan III. One of our emphases for AP III will be to refine and refocus our efforts toward a better understanding of what our students learn, and what we do when we are not satisfied with what we discover. The College Assessment Coordinators Committee has been considering five fundamental questions that may be useful discussion

points for departmental inquiry about student learning. Each question will be considered separately and in more detail over the next several months in the *Assessment of Student Learning Newsletter*. For starters, the five questions are:

- ▶ Are our program’s stated student learning outcomes appropriate for our degrees, our students, and our mission?
- ▶ What evidence do we have that our students achieve our stated learning outcomes?
- ▶ In what ways do we analyze and use evidence of student learning?
- ▶ How do we ensure shared responsibility for student learning and assessment of student learning?
- ▶ How do we advance our efforts to assess and improve student learning?

In closing, a focus on learning about our student’s learning of what really matters to us and our discipline are not new. What could be new for some programs is the visibly open and organized use of learning outcomes assessment strategies as a mode of inquiry to improve those outcomes for our students. With an approach of this nature, our role as critical scholars will further merge with our role in classrooms. Exciting times indeed!

From the Inside Looking Out



Erika skiing at Happy Jack in January.

Happy New Year! It is hard to believe that the fall semester has come to an end and that spring is already here. To say it has been busy is an understatement. UW has made considerable progress in its assessment efforts this fall and I would like to take a moment to share some of the highlights.

In October, I hosted a brown bag session at the ECTL to discuss the first-year results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) study. We are in the second year of a four-year study and I wanted to begin sharing the results with interested faculty and staff members. The CLA has received a lot of press over the last year as a potentially valuable assessment instrument for colleges and universities. For this reason, we are very excited to be part of a national study. We are beginning to learn more about the critical thinking, problem-solving, and writing skills of our students. To me, the most significant value of the CLA will be our ability to assess UW's contribution to gains in these skill areas. While I am not sure we will ever really know this with certainty, I am hopeful that our students will perform better over time and that their education at UW contributed to these improvements. See page 4 for more information on the CLA study. It is really interesting, so I encourage you to check it out.

In conjunction with the UW College Assessment Coordinators, the ETCL awarded 10 Assessment Assistance Grants in November. Recipients have up to a year to spend \$2,500 on their projects. The proposals, along with the past projects, are posted on the UW Assessment of Student Learning Web site. There are a lot of unique and innovative assessment initiatives happening all over campus. This is a great way to see what your colleagues are up to.

Speaking of our Assessment of Student Learning Web site, it was updated over the winter break. I am trying to add interesting items as I find them with the goal of turning the Web site into a major assessment resource for faculty. I recently created a bibliography for the various assessment-related books I have, all of which anyone can borrow by contacting me. Also, this fall, the College of Arts and Sciences completed its own Web-related assessment initiative. Nearly every department and

program now has its student learning outcomes published on the main department Web page. The Colleges of Engineering and Business have also done the same. You can find links to these outcomes, along with a summary of common themes in UW learning outcomes on the main Assessment of Student Learning Web site.

In looking ahead to spring, UW is participating in three institution wide assessment studies. First, we will be conducting the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This is a really great survey that provides a lot of useful information about the behaviors and perceptions of students when it comes to their learning experiences. UW last conducted it two years ago and has been participating fairly regularly for nearly a decade now. Because of this, we are starting to get some good longitudinal data on our students. UW was also selected to participate in the national "Parsing the First Year of College" study being conducted at Penn State. Under the leadership of Kelly Lowe from LeaRN, we will be inviting first-year students who completed the NSSE to also take two of ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) modules to assess writing and critical thinking. Finally, we will be conducting the second round of testing for the CLA study. Between February and April, the CLA students from our freshmen cohort who still meet the study criteria will be asked to take the test again. Needless to say, I expect it to be somewhat challenging to find everyone. As you know, students change their plans so many aren't here anymore; others will be studying abroad; and some will decide they no longer want to participate. I am up for the challenge though and overall, it has been a good experience so far. I look forward to sharing the results of these studies beginning next fall. Collectively, we should have some really valuable data at an institutional level about student learning.

In closing, I would like to thank everyone for their hard work this fall. If you need any assistance with your assessment of student learning projects, please do not hesitate to contact me at ekprager@uwyo.edu or 766-2897. Also, if you have ideas for the Web site or newsletter, please pass them along. I will be looking for people to contribute to the fall 2007 edition later this semester.

Erika K. Prager

University Assessment Specialist

In the Spotlight: Family and Consumer Sciences

By Karen Cachevki Williams, Head, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

As anyone in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences will attest, there is nothing quick or easy about developing a student assessment plan. They would also agree that the key to our multi-year process has been collaborative teamwork and focused time devoted to the bigger picture of tying student assessment to teaching, learning, and meaningful program assessment.

For more than 10 years, the department has had a history of devoting at least one two-hour monthly meeting to teaching issues, with additional committee meetings in between focusing on particular needs identified in those meetings. All of the faculty attend the teaching meetings, giving input even when they have to miss a meeting, and most serve on at least one committee. For example, Mike Liebman, Kari Morgan and Treva Sprout are looking at the core curriculum and how to identify portfolio assignments that fit the competencies into key courses. Kyle Kostelecky, Donna Brown, and Enette Larson Meyer are investigating

graduate student recruitment and retention strategies. Shane Broughton, Virginia Vincenti and Bruce Cameron are focusing on whether or not we should move to ePortfolio assessment of our graduate students. Sonya Meyer, Randy Weigel, and I worked on an ECTL assessment grant to conduct a survey of alums from 1995–2005 to see if our identified competencies were seen as appropriate in their current work lives. I'll now be conducting a survey of employers under our most current ECTL assessment grant with input from all faculty members.

We started our process many years ago by looking at our coursework and curriculum. We used a CSREES review in 1998 as an opportunity to begin a curriculum mapping activity that led to required coursework changes for our five current program options: Textiles and Merchandising, Professional Child Development, Family and Community Services, Dietetics, and Human Nutrition and Food. This also caused us to examine our student outcomes and to begin looking more closely at student

assessment. We wanted to know if our curriculum was producing the kinds of student learning and skills that we valued. In 2000 we began exploring the use of electronic student portfolios as a way to look at student assessment. We explored the competencies and skills from the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences as a starting point for our discussions and more targeted curriculum mapping activities.

Our first major focus was on student writing. This was a natural outgrowth of our participation in a set of Writing-Across-the-Curriculum workshops conducted by Jane Nelson, then director of the Writing Center, for our college. We partnered with the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics to conduct interviews of seniors in our respective capstone courses to see if student perceptions of themselves as writers matched faculty perception, what kinds of feedback on writing students felt were most helpful, and how all faculty could assist students to become competent writers.

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Back row: Karen Williams, Virginia Vincenti, Treva Sprout, Michael Liebman, Kyle Kostelecky, Shane Broughton. Front row: Donna Brown, Kari Morgan, Randy Weigel, Sonya Meyer. Kneeling in front: Enette Larson Meyer. Missing from photo: Rhoda Schantz, Bruce Cameron.



CLA Longitudinal Study Enters Second Year

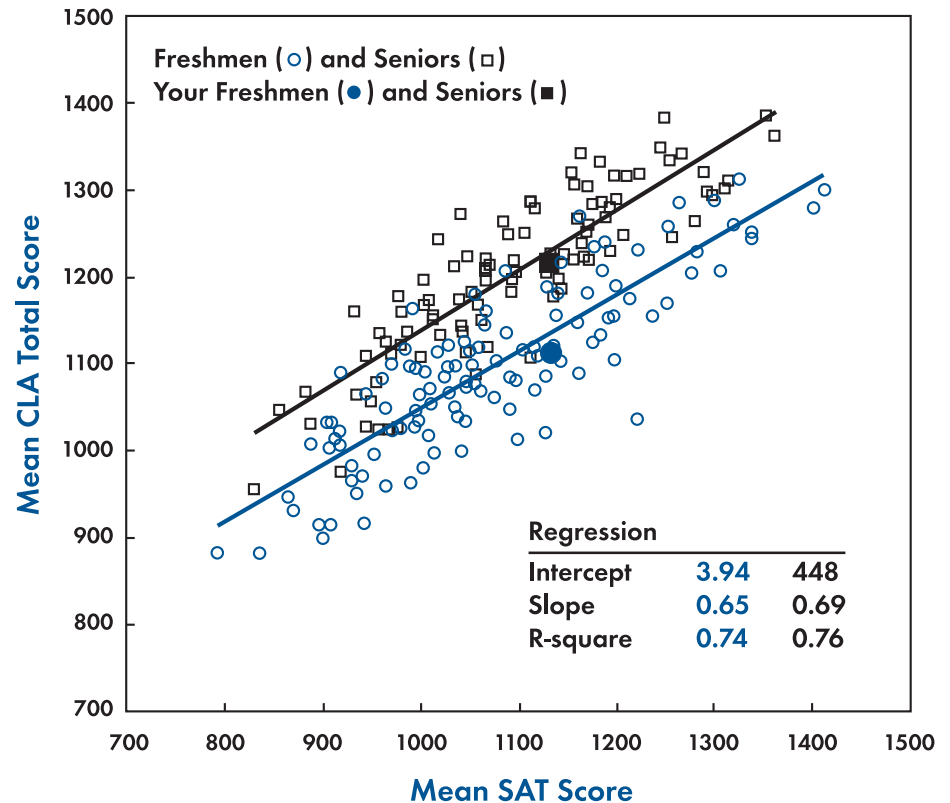
By Erika Prager, University Assessment Specialist

The University of Wyoming is more than half way through the second year of the four-year nationwide study to assess gains in student learning using the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). In fall 2005, 276 freshmen agreed to take the three-hour online assessment test to determine their incoming level of skills in the areas of critical thinking, problem-solving, and writing. These students became our study cohort and will be tested again as sophomores and seniors. In spring 2006, 125 seniors also took the CLA to determine expected levels for senior performance.

Last summer, UW received a first year report from the Council for Aid to Education, the organization conducting the study nationally and offering the CLA product for purchase to other institutions. Results were reported for UW students as a whole (for both freshmen and seniors), and in comparison to other institutions who used the CLA last year. Because of the variety of students taking

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Relationship Between CLA Performance and Incoming Academic Ability



ELLBOGEN CTL

Congratulations,
2006–07
Assessment
Assistance Grant
Recipients

Ginny Conley, Nursing – Capstone Portfolio Pilot Project

Scott Freng, Psychology – Assessing the Role of Research Methods in Academic Success

Linda Hutchinson, Secondary Education – Using CEID Assessment Information to Make Data Driven Decisions

Serena Lambert, Counseling – The Photovoice Assessment Project: Engaging Student Voices in Counselor Education

Terri Longhurst, Wyoming INstitute for Disabilities – Assessment Plan for Disability Studies Minors

Mona Schatz, Social Work – Building the Student Social Work Portfolio as an Outcomes-based Assessment Instrument

Margaret Skinner, Zoology and Physiology, and **Mark Lyford**, Biology – Developing Pre/Post Course Quizzes for the Assessment of Student Retention of Knowledge and Skills

Jessica Swanson, Criminal Justice – A Year for Development

Bryan Tronstad, UW Libraries – Assessment of Information Literacy: A Segment of USP L Component

Karen Williams, Family and Consumer Sciences – Employer Feedback on Competencies and ePortfolios

What is the Difference Between Assessment and Grading?

Excerpt from *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* by Linda Suskie. Reprinted with permission from Anker Publishing, available at <https://secure.aidcvt.com/ank/ProdDetails.asp?ID=1882982711>

Obviously there is a great deal of overlap between the concepts of grading and assessment. Both are attempts to identify what students have learned, and the grading process can therefore be an important component of an assessment program. But grades alone are usually insufficient evidence of student learning. Imagine applying for tenure or promotion and providing your students' grades as sole evidence of your teaching effectiveness and of what your students have learned. Would your tenure and promotion committee accept grades as sufficient evidence? Probably not, for the following reasons.



Faculty teaching sections of the same course may not agree on common standards and might therefore, theoretically, award different grades to the same student assignment. Sometimes individual grading standards are so vague that a faculty member might, conceivably, award an A to an essay one day and a B to the identical essay a week later.

Grades Alone May Give Insufficient Information on Student Strengths and Weaknesses

Grades alone don't always provide meaningful information on exactly what students have and haven't learned. We can

conclude from a grade of B in an organic chemistry course, for example, that the student has probably learned a good deal about organic chemistry, but from that grade alone we can't tell exactly what aspects of organic chemistry she has and hasn't mastered. Similarly, we can conclude from a grade of B on a sociology research paper that the student has probably learned a good deal about sociology research methods, but from the grade alone we can't tell exactly what aspects of the research process he has and hasn't mastered.

Grading and Assessment Criteria May (Appropriately) Differ

Some faculty base grades (appropriately) not just on evidence of what students have learned, such as tests, papers, presentations, and projects, but also on student behaviors that may or may not be related to course goals. Some faculty, for example, count class attendance toward a final course grade, even though students with poor attendance might nonetheless conceivably master course goals. Others count class participation toward the final grade, even though oral communication skills aren't a course goal. Some downgrade assignments that are turned in late.

These practices can all be very appropriate classroom management strategies and grading practices, but they illustrate how grades and assessment standards might not match. A student who has not achieved major learning goals might still earn a fairly high grade by playing by the rules and fulfilling other, less-important grading criteria.

Conversely, a student who has achieved a course's major learning goals might nonetheless earn a poor grade if she fails to do the other things expected of her.

Grades Do Not Reflect All Learning Experiences

As the Association of American Colleges and Universities' *Greater Expectations* (2002) report points out, grades give us information on student performance in individual courses or course assignments, not on how well students have learned key competencies, such as critical thinking or writing skills, holistically over an entire program. They also don't tell us what students have learned from ungraded cocurricular activities.

Grading Standards May Be Vague or Inconsistent

Sometimes grades are based on vague or inconsistent standards that do not correspond to major learning goals. While many faculty do base assignment and course grades on carefully conceived standards, grades can be inadequate, imprecise, and idiosyncratic, as Angelo points out in the preface to Walvoord and Anderson's (1998) *Effective Grading*. Faculty may say they want students to learn how to think critically but base grades on tests emphasizing factual recall.

Do Grades Have a Place in an Assessment Program?

Of course they do! Grades can be useful evidence of student learning if the grades are based on direct evidence of student learning (tests, projects, papers, assignments, etc.) that is clearly linked to major learning goals and clearly delineated, consistent standards through test blueprints (see Chapter 11) or rubrics (Chapter 7). Walvoord and Anderson's (1998) *Effective Grading* gives a plethora of practical suggestions on how to tie grades more closely to explicit learning goals and standards.

How the Co-curriculum Supports Student Learning

By Beth McCuskey, Director, Residence Life and Dining Services

Defined as programs and services *outside* of the classroom that support students' learning, co-curricular programs planned in tandem with curricular activities can provide an even greater depth of understanding by our students.

Setting the stage for students to learn can take many forms. From an inspiring lecture to self-directed research, students at the University of Wyoming have a myriad of opportunities to engage in challenging academic pursuits. The co-curriculum provides another avenue that can support student learning and success. Defined as programs and services *outside* of the classroom that support students' learning, co-curricular programs planned in tandem with curricular activities can provide an even greater depth of understanding by our students. The Division of Student Affairs offers many co-curricular opportunities to students. Two of these programs are highlighted below.

One example of a program that combines the curriculum and co-curriculum is the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program. Launched in 1998, FIGs provide first-year students the opportunity to live together in UW residence halls while taking three or four classes together. The theory behind FIGs suggests that the linking of subject matter across courses helps students develop an understanding of the interconnectedness among disciplines. Additionally, by residing on the same floor together, students naturally form study groups and develop a deeper understanding of course material from each other. Finally, intentionally planned activities, such as tours or field trips can help students grasp how course material is applied in an actual setting.

Because FIGs have been on campus for several years, the Office of Institutional Analysis has been able to track these students in comparison to their first-year

cohort throughout their time on campus. Despite having similar, if not slightly lower, high school performance data, FIG students tend to perform marginally better their first semester at UW, have higher retention rates throughout their career on campus, and have a higher four-year graduation rate than non-FIG students. The 2000 first-year FIG cohort, for example, had a 38 percent four-year graduation rate compared to 25 percent for their comparative first-year class. The next assessment step for FIGs is to define and assess learning outcomes for the program.

Another co-curricular program that has demonstrated its ability to support student success is Supplemental Instruction (SI). Supplemental Instruction provides weekly, structured review sessions, typically led by a successful peer team-leader, to support students enrolled in courses in which students earn a high number of D, W, and F grades, including freshman-level science, math, and English courses. The SI model stresses active, collaborative learning and acquisition of study skills that target the supported course with the assumption that these new skills are transferable. Students who attend two or more SI sessions in a semester have much higher average exam grades than non-attendees. For Biology 1010, average exam grade among SI attendees over the last three years was 15, 12, and 13 points higher than the average exam grade among students who did not participate in SI. In addition, there is a significant, positive correlation between the number of sessions attended and a student's final grade. Supplemental Instruction was



Beth McCuskey

implemented by the Student Educational Opportunity unit of Student Affairs in 2001 and is now coordinated by the LeARN Academic Success Partnership.

TRiO programs in Student Educational Opportunity also provide co-curricular support to eligible students. TRiO programs are funded through the US Department of Education to support postsecondary access and success among first generation students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and ethnic minority students. The Student Success Services (SSS) program provides individualized advising services, one-on-one tutoring, student success workshops, a structured First Year Experience program for incoming freshmen, and other services and activities designed to increase postsecondary retention and graduation among disadvantaged students. The McNair Scholars Program is a graduate school preparation program that provides intensive services to eligible students including a paid research internship, research design and graduate school admissions workshops and advising, opportunities for students to present their research, and funding for attendance at

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Family and Consumer Sciences Continued from page 3

In addition, we videotaped focus groups where the faculty participants examined their capstone courses. This led to an examination of the types of writing done in all of our courses, resulting in changes in curriculum sequencing, assignments, and course numbering. The results of this work, “A Collaborative Faculty Approach for Improving Teaching of Writing and Critical Thinking Across Disciplines: A Wyoming Case Study” were published in the *NACTA Journal*, winning the E.B. Knight Journal Award for 2003. They were also presented at the National Conference on Writing and Critical Thinking in Agriculture Conference in Jackson, Wyoming, in April 2003.

By this time we had narrowed our competencies to six: technology competency and computer literacy, critical thinking, oral communication, written communication, multicultural literacy and global awareness, and professional skills and behavior. The faculty worked for two years refining the competencies, creating rubrics to address three skill levels for each competency, and redesigning our FCSC 1010 Perspectives in Family and Consumer Sciences and FCSC 4010 Philosophical and Research Perspectives in Family and Consumer Sciences courses to be the initial and capstone ePortfolio courses. We refined a rotation plan so that all of the faculty would team teach either 1010 or 4010,

demonstrating our commitment to the core and to the electronic portfolio system. In 2005 we invited alums and other professionals to meet with us during our retreat to look at examples of student work and give feedback on the rubrics. We also had a ECTL grant to bring Paul Wasko from eFolio Minnesota to assist us with designing electronic portfolios. In that same year all the faculty went through Front Page training. In August 2006, we invited Erika Prager and Jim Wangberg to join us at our retreat to help look at methods of sampling student portfolios, an issue we still wrestle with as we continue to refine our student assessment process.

CLA Longitudinal Study Enters Second Year Continued from page 4

the CLA at UW and nationwide, scores were shown in relation to incoming ability as determined by SAT/ACT scores. The figure on page 4 shows a summary of these results. UW students, as shown by the solid markers, performed just below expectations (the solid lines), although not significantly. Statistically speaking, UW is considered to have performed “at expectations” because our results were less than one standard deviation below our expected results.

The next step of this study is to retest the freshmen cohort this spring. All students

were contacted this fall about the CLA and were reminded that they would be asked to take the test sometime between February and April. While it is unlikely that all students will take it again, the study goal is to retest at least 200 of them in this round. It appears that slightly less than 200 still meet the study criteria, however. We think most will agree to continue to participate and we should get fairly close to our target. In addition to the aggregate student scores, the next report should also provide information about the changes in student scores from their first to second year in college. Hopefully, the results will show that UW

students performed better as second-year students. Results are expected by early fall 2007.

For more information about the CLA study, please contact Erika Prager at ekprager@uwo.edu. The entire first year results report for UW is available upon request. Also, consider attending the next CLA brown bag session on Wednesday, April 4, from noon–1 p.m. at the ETCL for more in depth discussion about the CLA as an assessment tool and the second round of testing at UW.

How the Co-curriculum Supports Student Learning Continued from page 6

conferences, graduate school visits, tutoring, and GRE preparation courses.

TRiO programs are successful in helping students to persist in college, graduate from college, and enter graduate degree programs. Freshman to sophomore retention rates among participants in the SSS program range from 80 percent to 86 percent among students who are the first in their family to attend college; who are from low-income families; who have a disability; and who show academic need for services based on

low ACT scores, low high school GPA, or failing grades in college. First-year to second-year retention rates for all UW students are between 75 percent and 77 percent for the same period. Students served by the McNair Scholars program (low-income, first generation, and/or minority students) enter graduate school in the first academic year after receiving their baccalaureate degree at a rate of 68 percent versus a 17 percent enrollment rate among all undergrads nationally.

Co-curricular programs provide another learning opportunity for students. Because

learning is more powerful when it can be synthesized and applied, the co-curriculum can be a way to bolster activities taking place inside the classroom. Student Affairs programs include student leadership opportunities, volunteerism programs, and diversity initiatives among many others. For more information about how the co-curriculum may be used to support initiatives taking place in your classroom, contact Beth McCuskey at 766-3125 or John Nutter at 766-5123.



Mark Your Calendar

UW Survey Tool Information Session

Thursday, February 22, 2007 from noon–1 p.m., ECTL Coe 307

Learn more about using UW's new survey tool for your next online survey. It's free and easy to use!

Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) Study— Second Year Update Brown Bag Session

Wednesday, April 4, 2007 from noon–1 p.m., ECTL, Coe 307

Learn more about the CLA study including the results of the fall 2006 student survey about the use of incentives to get students to participate/motivation to do well on the test and the 2007 testing session.

The University of Wyoming assessment newsletter is published each semester (Erika Prager, university assessment specialist, editor). Any editorial comments reflect the view of the editor and not necessarily the university. Send comments, questions, and/or suggestions to Erika at 766-2897 or ekprager@uwyo.edu. Past issues are available at uwadmnweb.uwyo.edu/acadaffairs/assessment/Pages/News.asp. • Persons seeking admission, employment, or access to programs of the University of Wyoming shall be considered without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, or political belief. • If you would like more information about support for students with disabilities at UW or to receive this publication in alternative formats, please call University Disability Support Services at (307) 766-6189 or TTY (307) 766-3073. • Graphic design by Elizabeth Ono Rabel • 2007/1.8M/JT

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