

W&J GETS SMARTER ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

By Tracey R. Kolodziej

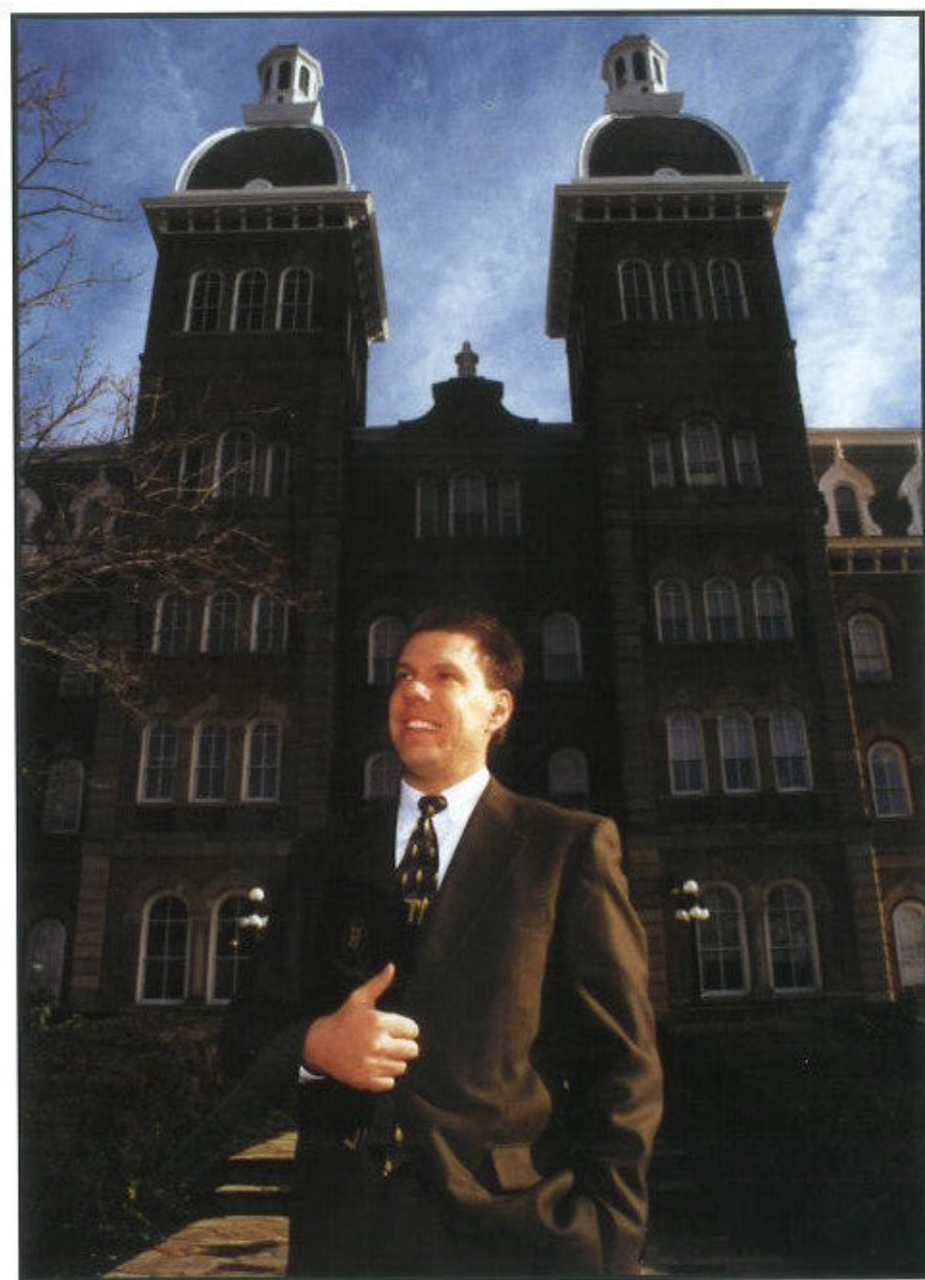
An innovative approach to education is about to transform the way in which teaching and learning occur at Washington & Jefferson College.

Born in the new Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which is housed in Old Main, this innovative approach to education is intended to move W&J into a class of its own by promoting better methods for teaching and learning in a more overt and intentional way than ever before.

"We want to get smarter about how teaching and learning occur and then present that information so it's easily digestible for faculty and students," said Dr. James Sloat, director of the new Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Since his arrival at W&J in September 2001, Dr. Sloat has been planning a variety of ways in which the College can reexamine the teaching and learning process and dedicate resources to advance it further.

As a way to study this process, Dr. Sloat will facilitate internal focus groups at W&J in the spring to discuss openly the challenges that teachers face in the classroom and the obstacles that students must overcome in learning. In order to be successful, however, both professors and students will need to keep their egos in check. "This requires a great deal of humility to listen to where the frustrations are," said Dr. Sloat. "As academics we're used to being the king of our kingdoms, and we often justify what we do as existing truth. If we truly want to achieve greatness, we can't be defensive about how we teach. Instead, we need to be open about how we can improve."

In addition to offering valuable insight into what does and doesn't work in the class-



Dr. James Sloat, director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

room, the focus groups will also help guide the way in which professors integrate new skill requirements into their courses. Under the new curriculum, students who graduate from W&J must demonstrate proficiency in five skill areas: writing, oral communications,

critical reading, quantitative reasoning, and use of information technology. This skill proficiency is required across disciplines, meaning that students might be asked to demonstrate writing proficiency in a history class, or technology proficiency in a music class.

Although the idea of developing one set of skills through a variety of disciplines is a common foundation for liberal arts education, it is unusual for a liberal arts college to take such a comprehensive approach in building these skills. "Many colleges have incorporated individual skills into the curriculum, such as writing across the curriculum," said Dr. James Dlugos, associate vice president for academic affairs. "But it is highly unusual for a liberal arts college to incorporate such a wide range of skills into an already existing set of courses."

The innovative and comprehensive nature of the new curriculum has posed a particular challenge to W&J faculty members. Because it's their responsibility to provide instruction and assess proficiency in these necessary skills, professors must find ways to design a chemistry course as a writing course, and a philosophy course as a technology course. The nature of these unconventional combinations makes their challenge no small task.

Although faculty members have been supportive in developing and implementing the new curriculum, they know they can't do it on their own. Faculty will need an ongoing support system and professional development

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training to reach the College's desired level of excellence, and the new center will provide the resources they need for success. "We want to serve as a resource to professors who might be experts in their subject area, but might not know the best ways to help their students develop and grow in other areas," said Dr. Sloat. "If we're going to ask faculty to teach in a way that highlights things differently, we need to give them the support they need and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning will do that."

In an effort to support the transition to the new curriculum, the center will host a series of workshops and build a team of faculty associates who will represent each skill requirement. The center will also offer opportunities for summer retreats that explore creative ways to move skill proficiency to an advanced level in discrete disciplines.

"I'm not going to say, 'Look I'm a master teacher and you're not, so here's what you need to do,'" Dr. Sloat said. "Instead, I'm going to provide the excuse to get together and share our best moments of teaching so that we can all learn from each other."

In addition to offering resources to faculty, the center will also act as a resource for students. According to Dr. Dlugos, the idea of combining both teaching and learning support systems in one central location is new to the world of higher education. "There are some research universities that offer teaching resource centers for their graduate students and some liberal arts colleges that offer learning resource centers for their students, but no one has taken the idea of life-long learning for both students and faculty and institutionalized it in this way."

To further promote W&J as a community of learners, Dr. Sloat will build partnerships with external sources, including area school districts and other non-profit agencies. In a

series of focused meetings during the past year among W&J and the Washington, Trinity, and Avella School Districts, the College has identified ways in which all of these neighboring schools can share in their combined wealth of resources and learn from each other. According to Dr. James Longo, associate professor of education at W&J, the partnership component of the center represents the cornerstone of education. "Recently, I had a stu-



Dr. Buba Misawa, associate professor of political science, and Dr. Sloat discuss W&J's new approach to teaching and learning.

dent teacher write on a final exam that she had learned not only how to be a teacher, but also how to be a student. She got it. She understands that teaching is a two-way street," Dr. Longo said. "As a teacher, I have as much to learn from my students and from others as they have to learn from me."

In pursuit of a better model of teaching and learning, the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has already begun to plant seeds for academic excellence through collaborative partnerships, focus group discussions, and plans for support systems. As these seeds begin to take root, Dr. Sloat expects that people will begin to notice visible signs of excellence. "Anyone who walks on this campus will immediately be hit by excellence," Dr. Sloat said. "The center is about identifying, cultivating, and celebrating those areas of excellence."