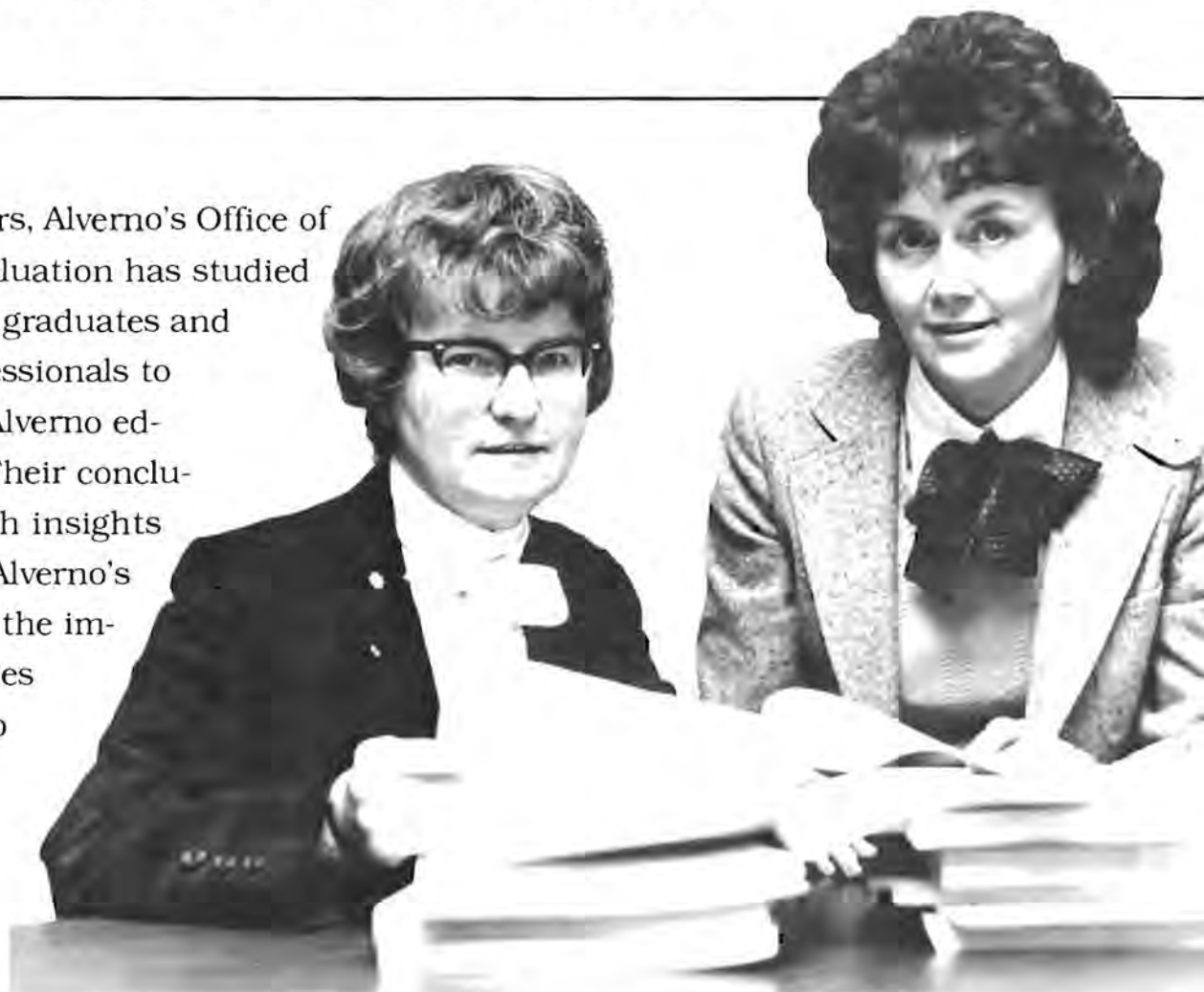


# Do the abilities learned in college make a difference?

For seven years, Alverno's Office of Research and Evaluation has studied Alverno students, graduates and outstanding professionals to find out how an Alverno education is used. Their conclusions provide fresh insights into the value of Alverno's education — and the importance of abilities learned at Alverno in the careers that follow.



The college degree. It is as old as higher education itself, and it spans the past eight centuries as one of a handful of things that have been consistently valued by society. There was a time, only two generations ago, when the highest attainment to which a parent could aspire was a college degree for his or her child. And it was only a generation ago that many parents achieved this goal and sent the baby boom on its way to becoming the most educated generation ever, swelling

enrollments at colleges across the land.

But when the baby boom graduated from college and entered the job market, they found that the B.A. degree was no longer a passport to full time employment. At the same time tuition at colleges assumed investment proportions, and with graduates joining the ranks of the unemployed, people began to ask questions about a college degree that had never been asked before.

What good is a college degree? What does it accomplish? Does it really produce the "well rounded" individuals attributed to it? And does a degree do any good on the job, after college? These are the questions that higher education supporters face today. And they are finding themselves short of well-substantiated answers.

In 1976, Alverno College's Office of Research and Evaluation began a massive research project designed to answer some of these

## Alverno's Eight Abilities

**Communication:** The competent communicator habitually makes connections between herself and her audience, with and without the aid of graphics, electronic media and even computers.

**Analysis:** The competent analyzer is a clear thinker and a critical thinker. She fuses experience, reason and training into considered judgement.

**Problem Solving:** The competent problem solver gets done what needs to be done. The ability overlaps with and uses all other abilities.

**Valuing:** The competent valuer recognizes different value systems, knows her values and habitually engages them in her life.

**Social Interaction:** The competent interactor makes constructive contributions to work done in committees, in consultation with others and on task forces.

**Environmental Responsibility:** Our environment is our world, and the environmentally responsible person acts with an understanding of the interdependence of all life here on earth.

**Involvement in the Contemporary World:** The responsibility of freedom, carried out with personal awareness, intercultural perception and an understanding of questions in their historical context.

**Aesthetic Responses:** An understanding that some things can only be expressed symbolically, and an awareness of how this is done through the arts.

questions. Researchers wanted to know if Alverno's liberal arts-based curriculum really produced the abilities that it sought, and if these abilities made any difference in careers after college. To answer these questions, data were gathered from three groups: students, alumnae of Alverno and working professionals who were not Alverno graduates. By the time the research was completed — 18,500 responses later — fifty-three members of Alverno's faculty had worked on the project. All together the perfor-

mance of 750 students, 60 alumnae and 180 successful professionals had been studied. A summary of the 2,000 page report, called "Careering After College: Establishing the Validity of Abilities Learned in College for Later Careering and Professional Performance," was principally authored by Marcia Mentkowski, Director of Alverno's Office of Research and Evaluation and Dean Austin Doherty.

Alverno's hefty research report is attracting a lot of

national attention because it provides important information about the value of the college degree after college. Essentially, the study shows that a curriculum like Alverno's yields critical abilities that prepare students for their place in work and in society. Since releasing the report, Alverno researchers have been asked to make presentations at the Carnegie Corporation in New York, the American Association of Higher Education and National Institute of Education in Washington, and elsewhere. Reaction to the study by educators has been particularly favorable. Russell Edgerton, President of the American Association of Higher Education, called the research "one of the most exciting educational stories of the decade."

What educators find exciting are Alverno's answers to two critical questions. First, do students develop the abilities sought by Alverno's curriculum? Second, if you can show that students develop these abilities, do they carry over to life **after** college?

### Do Students Develop the Abilities Sought in Alverno's Curriculum?

Most colleges - and their students - are content with the centuries-old assumption that college students acquire both a

*To our research participants:*

*We want all of you, who contributed so much, to feel a special part of this work, and to share with us our delight in seeing results from our mutual efforts. Our thanks to each of you who voluntarily gave your time, thoughts, and responses to make this ongoing research possible. Without your willing help, insights we all have gained could not have been achieved. As you may have expected, we plan to invite you to participate in the future, so we may continue this longitudinal research. You will be hearing from us again!*

*Best wishes,*

*Marcia Mentkowski*

broad range of knowledge and a set of intangible abilities that are most often referred to as "being well rounded." The popular image of the college graduate is that of a person with distinct characteristics: the ability to look at a problem from several points of view, the ability to make judgements guided by a broad range of knowledge and contemporary awareness, having a consistent set of values, and possessing an appreciation of the aesthetic. These characteristics are generally thought to be serendipitous by-products of a college education, usually attributed to the college "atmosphere." While they are learned, they are not explicitly taught.

But Alverno's research shows that these abilities *can* be



explicitly stated, taught, and measured. As taught at Alverno, these abilities are: communicating effectively, thinking analytically, doing problem solving, valuing, interacting effectively, making decisions within environmental systems, assuming civic responsibility for contemporary issues, and responding aesthetically.

These abilities are the explicit centerpiece of the Alverno curriculum. They can be seen in the more than 100 performance assessments each student engages in throughout her coursework. Alverno's faculty teach students how to use these abilities in a variety of situations; students evaluate the development of these abilities in themselves and in other students; and community assessors help

students and faculty gauge progress toward independent use of these abilities.

As one student said, "You can see that you've really been learning in school because you can use it . . . it's not just something memorized . . . it's something you can actually work with . . . it's the experiences they give you that have shown me that I've learned."

One major finding of the research study is that the abilities which Alverno students develop and reveal in coursework and assessments are also revealed in instruments that have been designed and tested outside Alverno. Thus, the change that occurs in students at Alverno is *directly* attributable to successful participation in the school's curriculum. Change occurs



*Alverno students take part in over 100 performance assessments during their college careers.*

because of what the student does in college — how she applies and uses her abilities in coursework, in simulations, in external assessments evaluated by professionals from outside Alverno, and through internships, where she uses what she has learned “on the job.”

The significance of these findings becomes even more clear when you realize that fewer and fewer students are spending all their time on college campuses. Because more and more students are working to pay for their education, they have less time to participate in extra-curricular events. Therefore, it is reassuring to know that these abilities are not linked to only college “atmosphere” and the general experience of “going to college,” but also to the Alverno curriculum.

### **What Difference Do These Abilities Make in Life After College?**

A second question that Alverno’s research posed and answered is: Do the abilities students learn in Alverno’s curriculum affect their careers success?

When Alverno researchers analyzed what practicing professionals do on the job, they found remarkable similarity between the abilities that the study showed are characteristic

of Alverno graduates and the abilities that make for effectiveness in work settings. These findings are important to employers who are demanding increased work performance from people they hire. And they are important to students who, in increasing numbers, enter college with concerns about their future working lives.

Eighty nurses from three health care settings and over one hundred women managers/executives from more than fifty private corporations provided job performance interviews and histories of their personal career paths. They also rated the importance of key competences for job selection and performance. The major finding from analysis of this data is that the abilities identified by successful professionals as important to their effectiveness are very similar to the abilities learned in Alverno’s curriculum.

Both the managers and the nurses identified analytical and interpersonal abilities as critical for job effectiveness. Nurses, for example, found many occasions in their work where the health of their patients was achieved as much by good communication and analysis abilities as by their skills with a syringe. Likewise, effective business professionals tended to give more importance to their broad analysis skills and

interpersonal abilities than to their number-crunching skills.

Data from interviews with Alverno College graduates show that these abilities are the cornerstone for effective performance at their workplace. Both younger and older women across all professional groups used the abilities they learned in college and, in using them, found they made the difference in their work. As one graduate said, “You are more aware of your interaction skills, how you present yourself to people and how your interaction affects work relations.”

Alverno researchers look upon their findings as “a first step.” As Mentkowski points out, the reason for carrying out the research was not just to find out about the effectiveness of a college education in general, but to improve Alverno’s curriculum in particular. She put it this way:

“We found out, as carefully and objectively as we could, that students do learn the abilities Alverno seeks to teach and that they make an important difference. Now we can invest the findings and insights from the study back into the curriculum. And we will continue to study our curriculum and our students’ performance with it after college. We are committed to evaluation not just to prove our curriculum’s effectiveness, but most importantly, to improve it.”