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The Wheel for the Well-Rounded Denisonian

Paul A. Djupe

Denison University

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The Wheel for the Well-Rounded Denisonian

Paul A. Djupe

April 8, 2020

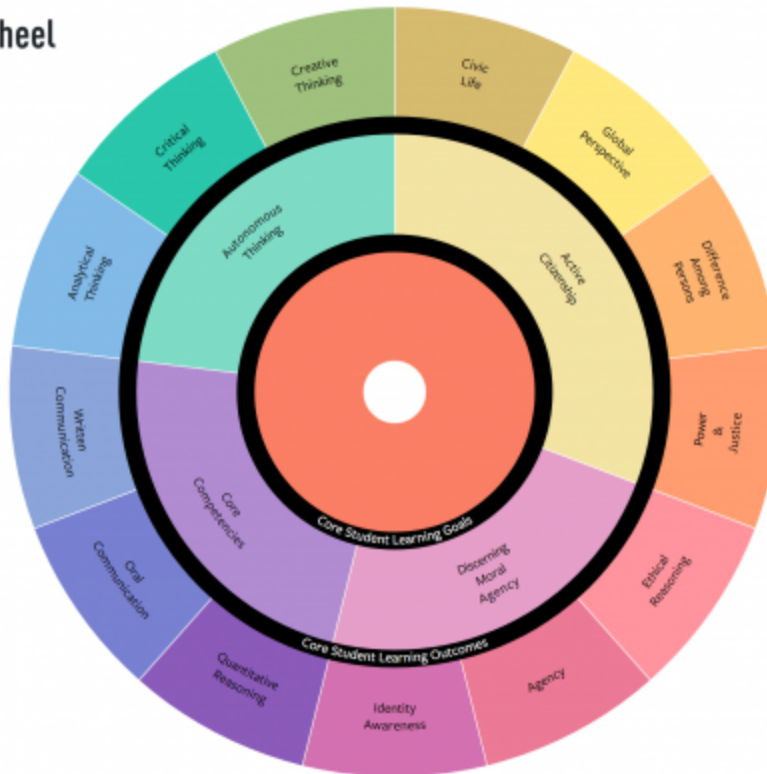
By Paul A. Djupe

“Our purpose is to inspire and educate our students to become autonomous thinkers, discerning moral agents, and active citizens of a democratic society.” Some of the most famous words at Denison University, the mission statement steers the ship, giving us a set of lofty goals to work toward. We all believe that we’re working toward this mission and that students graduate on track toward their fulfillment (even if that is a lifetime project). Still, at some point the social scientist asks the uncomfortable question, “How do we know?” That leads to yet more uncomfortable questions like, “What does autonomous thinking mean?” What is “active citizenship”? How do we capture “discerning moral agency” out in the wild?

One way to start down this road was to map out a set of major learning goals that the mission statement implies. The Wheel, a product of Student Development, is the result. Available through MyDenison to everyone, including the faculty species, The Wheel is a dynamic tool that allows you to catalogue your experiences at Denison. You can add courses, organizational affiliations, and activities engaged to any of the pie slices, leaving you with a categorized resume. Perhaps not every slice gets filled, since some specialization is expected, but we suspect that most students will have something categorizable in most every slice.

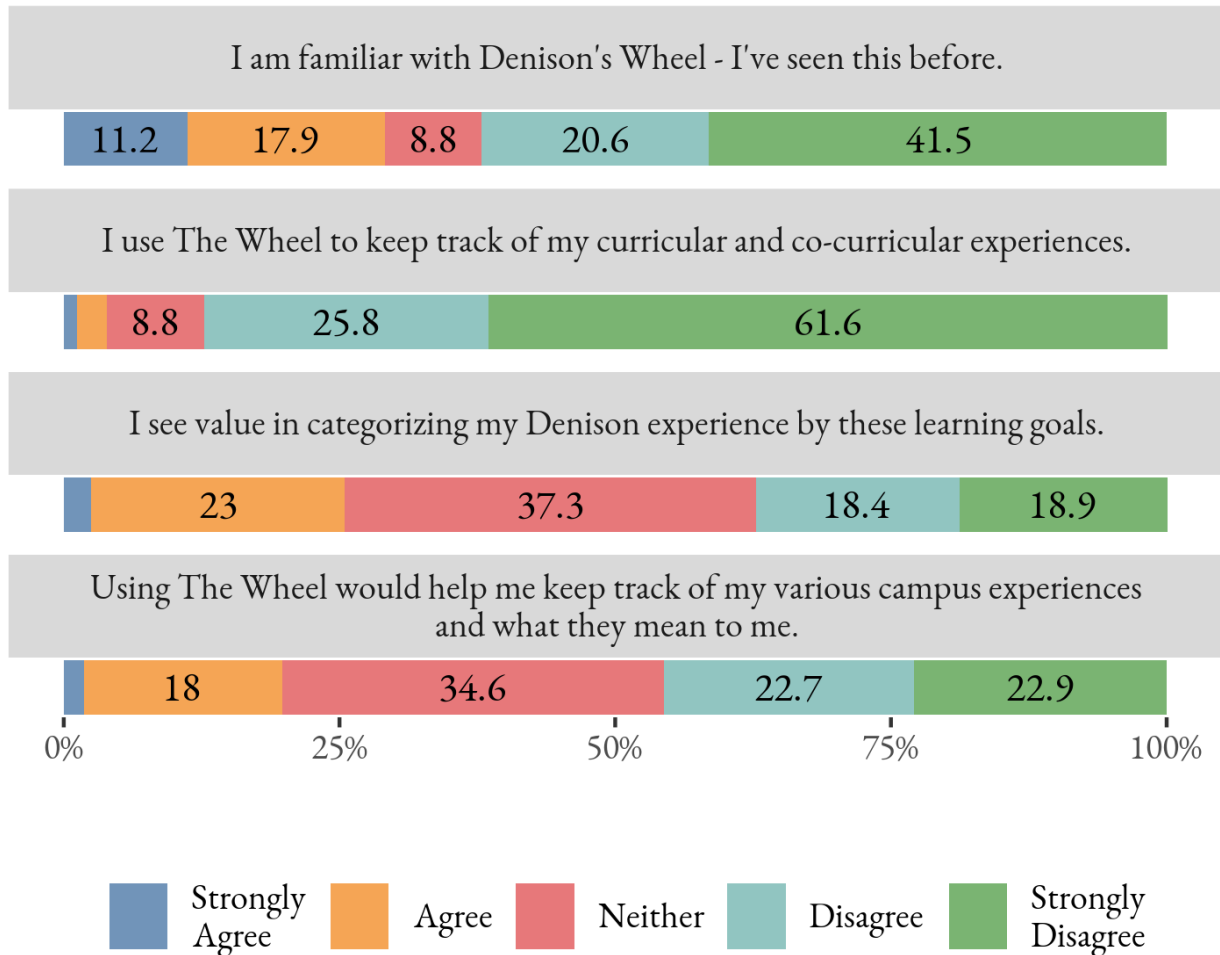
Our purpose is to inspire and educate our students to become autonomous thinkers, discerning moral agents and active citizens of a democratic society.

The Wheel



Do you have any idea about The Wheel? 127 was on top of this, asking several questions about it in the March 2020 survey. In the figure below, a majority of survey respondents disagreed that they had seen The Wheel before. Even fewer (less than 10% few) indicate that they are using it. But that's not the end of the story. Now that they have been exposed to The Wheel through this survey, do they see some value in it? A quarter agree, the plurality (37%) shrug, and just over a third disagree. Apparently Denisonians don't think they need help keeping track of their activities because only about 20% agree with the final statement that The Wheel would help them keep track. Of course, the days furiously combing through memory and emails putting together a resume in the Junior and Senior years belie this confidence, but that's another story.

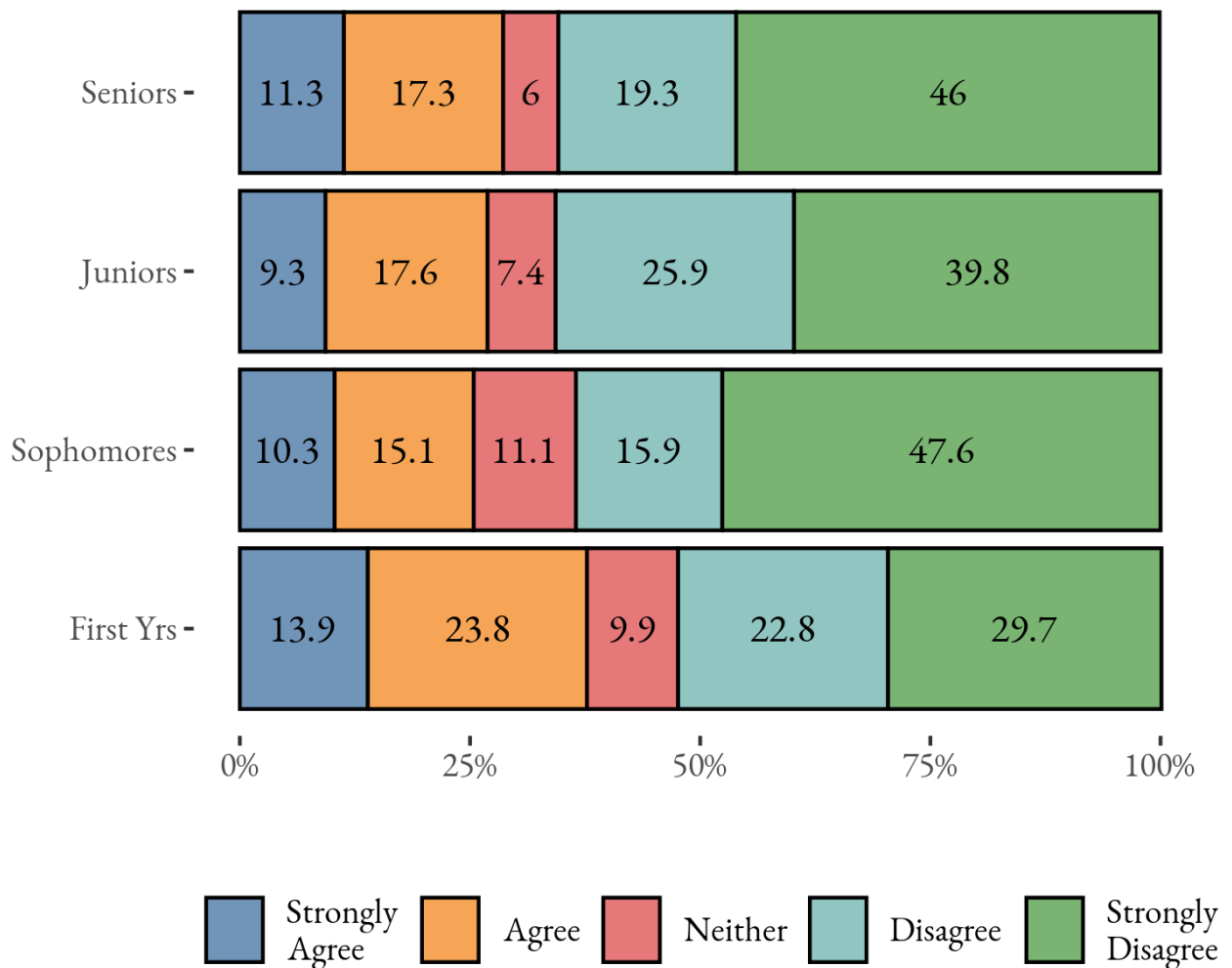
Students have been exposed to The Wheel That's about it though



Source: March 2020 Survey

The Wheel is rather new, so perhaps it's no surprise that it's not well known or used. Is it more commonly known among first years? Yeah, a little. A slim majority of first year students disagree that they're familiar with the wheel, but that's less than the $\frac{2}{3}$ of juniors and seniors who are unfamiliar with it. The same pattern repeats for the other questions – just under 20% of first years say they are using The Wheel compared to a veritable handful of seniors. Somewhat more first years, too, see value in The Wheel, though that view is not common among any class year.

'I am familiar with 'The Wheel'



Source: March 2020 Survey

Why would you bother? The answer drives at the purpose of a liberal arts education, which is generally not to train you for a specific task (this is why there are generally no professional programs at LACs), but to develop your skills and habits of mind sufficient to engage a wide range of questions and tasks. “Flexible learners” are highly sought after. According to a [survey of business execs](#) commissioned by a top higher education organization (AAC&U):

The college learning outcomes they rate as most important are oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, written communication, and the real-world application of skills and knowledge. [and...] business executives and hiring managers find ePortfolios containing artifacts of demonstrable skills more helpful than college transcripts and resumes alone.

Perhaps you stand with Zach Correia, who [opined](#) in The Bullsheet that, “Nothing captures the essence of a free-thinking aspect of the liberal arts like pre-defined outcomes!” But at a very basic level, it is tremendously difficult to understand the world without conceptual bins.

You will have a more or less wide range of experiences in and out of class that will result in a transcript and perhaps a resume, but how do you make sense of those long lists? What does it all add up to? Seen in this light, The Wheel is a codex that can help translate your lists of specific experiences into a holistic narrative that can be interpreted by a general audience. Moreover, showing that you can engage in this meta-level of thinking is perhaps just as, if not more, important as the experiences themselves.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught social science research methods and political science at Denison for millenia. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on Twitter and you should be too along with your president.