

Advancing Student Learning: What We are Learning at the Teagle Foundation

President's Essay

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I. The National Conversation

There's good news for American undergraduate students. American higher education is changing. It's changing fast and (by and large) it's changing in the right direction. That, at least, is what we are seeing at the Teagle Foundation.

Such optimism may not be obvious to all, so let me explain. To many people outside the enterprise American higher education looks, I suspect, like a great ocean liner, vast and powerful, with multiple decks and accommodations for a broad clientele, excellent recreational facilities, dining options for every dietary preference, excellent services of every conceivable type, state of the art equipment, and talented and steadily growing support staffs. It is unquestionably the finest anywhere, something everyone else envies. But some of our fellow citizens have been wondering whether it is on course, indeed, whether it knows where it is heading, and whether it is too cumbersome to change course. Is it pricing itself out of its market? Has it become obsolete, destined to end up high and dry somewhere in an educational desert?

Many of those doubts were given loud expression over the last year or so through a series of reports highly critical of American higher education, and most recently through a set of recommendations emanating from the federal Department of Education, the so-called Spellings Commission. The most challenging of those recommendations—involving a dramatic expansion of federal oversight of higher education—seem, at this writing, to continue the nautical metaphor, dead in the water. But the underlying concerns have not gone away, nor are they likely to at a time when costs are rising rapidly, global competition is increasing, and employers are complaining that college graduates are often ill prepared for the workplace. (The Association of American Colleges and Universities' National Survey of Employers finds that “63 percent of employers believe that recent college graduates do not have the skills they need to succeed in the global economy.” See www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/GlobalCentury_ExecSum_final.pdf.)

These concerns, I believe, have to be taken very seriously. From what I can see they *are* being taken seriously both by individual colleges and universities, accrediting organizations, and national organizations determined to

help their member institutions improve student engagement and learning. But there is much still to be done.

Accountability

The banner word under which much of the discussion of higher education is taking place is “accountability.” It means different things to different people, from the crassest forms of short-term cost-benefit analysis, to the loftiest rhetoric about personal development over a lifetime of learning. For some of the past year it seemed as if the federal government would seize the rights to the term and equate it with minimal standards as determined by a single achievement test administered nationwide. Since much of the historic strength of American higher education comes from its diversity, independence, and autonomy, many of us feared such intervention would homogenize and bureaucratize our colleges and universities. Even more troubling, however, was the likelihood that setting minimal standards would validate mediocrity, and not press institutions to develop capacities that are truly essential—critical thinking, clarity about values, effectiveness in written and oral communication, global understanding, and, not least, ingenuity and creativity—precisely the capacities that are the result of a rigorous education in the liberal arts and sciences.

In short, I feared that, as Peter Ewell has phrased it, “the accountability conversation would hijack the assessment conversation.” It seemed that the hard work that had been done in recent years to learn more about students’ cognitive development would be turned into a blunt instrument for the allocation of resources, or for another public thrashing of higher education. And that, in turn, would provoke more resistance to any form of systematic assessment.

II. The Teagle Conversation

The work we are seeing at the Teagle Foundation makes me believe that the assessment movement is more mature than that. A participant at a recent Teagle conference said, “We’ve moved into a more nuanced conversation that is seeking out ways to make assessment integral to our colleges and universities and to the ways our faculty think of their work. As part of this move, the power of inter-institutional collaboration is becoming increasingly evident.”

Collaboration

This observation matches our experience at Teagle, and in particular the benefits that are emerging from inter-institutional collaboration. After a new series of grants in May, the Teagle Foundation now supports collaborative assessment projects on more than one hundred campuses. These range from projects focused on one national instrument—the Collegiate Learning Assessment—that assesses critical thinking and analytical reasoning, to others exploring moral reasoning, civic engagement, and even spirituality. “Can such things really be assessed?” one naturally asks. Perhaps not at the individual level,

but we certainly can, and *should*, ask whether the conditions on campus are conducive to growth of these and similar capacities. (Creativity provides a good test case, as a recent podcast interview with Steven Tepper of Vanderbilt University makes clear. You can find this and other Teagle podcasts at www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/podcasts.aspx.)

The institutions involved in our assessment work range from large universities such as the University of Southern California to small colleges where teaching loads are high and resources limited. Rich Ekman, President of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), which has organized a collaboration among thirty-plus member colleges, has reported examples of impressive progress being made by members of this Teagle funded project. The participating institutions all use the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and then compare results, problems, and opportunities with a view to improving student learning on their campuses. Cabrini College (PA), for example, used the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) “Level of Academic Challenge” scores to engage faculty members in interpreting CLA results so that, taken together, these sources of evidence can help shape the revision of the general education curriculum. Another member of the consortium, Barton College (NC), which has shared their CLA results with prospective students and their parents, is using those results to change campus culture by relying on hard evidence—not simply anecdotal accounts—to continue to press for improvements in student writing and critical thinking skills.

Two key lessons have already emerged from the consortial experience. First, engagement of faculty members in assessment is essential to improve student learning. Second, CLA results are best interpreted when used in conjunction with other assessment measures, such as NSSE, portfolio analyses, and the like. In combination, these two lessons point to an even larger agenda, that of creating a culture of assessment that is based on evidence.

Kalamazoo College (MI) has pioneered a new way of using the results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment and has published the results in an important article in *Peer Review* which can be found at www.aacu.org/peerreview/pr-sp07/pr-sp07_practice.cfm. Here, as so often, no one claims that one year’s results from a single assessment instrument produces definitive answers to the question, “How can we improve student engagement and learning on our campus?” But data inform questions such that even incomplete evidence can stimulate more vigorous inquiries and enrich faculty deliberations about how student learning can be brought to higher levels. Kalamazoo has much to be proud of, both in the results it is achieving and in the way it is using them to improve their students’ learning.

It’s not always easy sledding, however, as became evident when data from the Wabash National Survey of Liberal Arts Education, developed at the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, were presented at one college. Director Charles Blauch writes:

We had challenging news for [College X]. They scored very poorly on some of the quality of teaching results and also on questions about institutional challenge I presented faculty on the educational policy committee with data that depicted [College X's] overall position relative to that of other institutions. I then...focused...on items on which they did well, and then on items on which they did poorly.... The faculty on the committee were shocked. Normally they might ignore student responses to some of these questions on teaching...but because the study includes both outcomes AND measures of teaching practices we can say, "Actually, for your students these responses did predict their learning" It was a tough meeting, but it seems to have made a dent.

Transparency

When the Teagle Foundation started its work in faculty-led, ground-up assessment a few years ago, many friends told me that colleges would never be willing to share data about as sensitive a topic as student learning, and that collaboration among institutions would be impossible. The success of our collaboratives proves them wrong. Even more surprising, however, is the emerging willingness of colleges to be transparent about the evidence they have on student learning. It is hard for a publicly funded institution to deny the public access to such information, but private colleges can, and often do, claim that such information is confidential. Gradually, however, colleges are (to quote Dick Hersh) "going naked," recognizing that the best way to improve is to be fully open about student learning on their campus, and about what they are doing to improve it. This is happening not only at Teagle funded colleges but at other institutions as well. More than 250 colleges and universities have now agreed to let their NSSE results be consulted on the *USA Today* website at www.usatoday.com/news/education/2007-11-04-nsse-how-to_N.htm — something unthinkable just a few years ago. But one of the most dramatic examples of transparency comes from one of our grant recipients, a fine college in Michigan (see the Teagle Liblog entry, "There's Hope" at www.teaglefoundation.org/liblog/entry.aspx?bid=1&id=133) that has become more transparent in order to become even better.

Systematic Improvement

"Systematic," like "accountability" is an often emotionally charged word in the higher education lexicon. It may be less commonly used than "accountability," "comparability" or "transparency" in current discourse about higher education, but in my view it is every bit as important. Evidence about student engagement and learning often sits idle in the offices of directors of institutional research or deans. Sometimes it never reaches faculty committees, or is used in only trivial ways. So one naturally wants to ask, "Will colleges and universities use evidence about student learning to achieve systematic improvements in students' academic life? One answer to that question is easy, "Yes, some are already doing so." But how many and can the number be

increased, the process improved? Can colleges and universities become true “learning organizations?”

Those questions, the ones about systematic improvement, apply at every level, from the smallest, newest community college, to the ivied halls of the grandest research universities. Over the past year we have given considerable thought to those questions, finally concluding that the best way to answer them is to invite institutions to try, with support from the foundation and with sharing of results among peer institutions. We hope to encourage such work in coming months and will announce new projects on our website.

Locked Arms

College presidents are already locking arms to do what they recognize is “the right thing.” Over the summer of 2007 a half-dozen Phi Beta Kappa quality colleges in the Midwest formed the Midwest Alliance for Learning in the Liberal Arts. In setting up this alliance, the presidents of the institutions committed themselves “to developing better tools and measures to assess students' growth at our colleges, so that teaching and learning may be enhanced and the promise of the liberal arts may be fulfilled in ways we can demonstrate.

It takes skill, of course, to enhance student learning in this way—skill and knowledge about student learning and how to assess it that few of us acquired in graduate school. But we don't have to wait for a new generation of faculty. The Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College is providing valuable assistance for institutions that want to use systematic assessment to improve student achievement in the liberal arts and sciences. This includes the consulting services of Teagle Assessment Scholars, faculty members and administrators who volunteer to help their colleagues at other institutions put assessment to work on their campuses in educationally appropriate ways.

Waiting for Godot?

The same skeptics who said that colleges would never share information about student learning now often say that systematic improvement in student learning will never be achieved until graduate education is fundamentally reformed and the reward system in academia is redesigned. The skeptics may be right, but faculty tell us two things that again make me hopeful. One is that working with their colleagues at peer institutions often brings great satisfaction, especially now that many of the projects that Teagle has funded are beginning to produce results in the classroom. They also express strong interest in knowing more about how students learn, what memory is, how stereotypes affect learning, what's going on in the brains of late adolescents and young adults. Such topics, it seems to us, are ideal subjects for genuinely collegial exchange among faculty in a wide variety of fields, post docs, and graduate students, the college teachers of tomorrow. For that reason, the Foundation has recently announced a new grant program called “Collegia” to support such work. These grants will be announced in spring 2008.

The Disciplines

At the Teagle Foundation we see collaboration most clearly on the campuses of independent undergraduate colleges, where the commitment to education in the liberal arts and sciences runs deep. But there is similar movement among the scholarly disciplines, cutting across various sectors of higher education. This became evident when the Foundation invited applications from scholarly associations and centers interested in rethinking the relationship between the undergraduate major in their field and liberal education goals. The response was vigorous, the proposals were by and large excellent, and an initial meeting of the grant recipients immensely encouraging. The old idea that “general” or “liberal” education can be taken care of in the first year or two of college and the rest of the college years can then be devoted to some mix of electives and courses in one’s major now seems to be fading under the light of a much more searching and refulgent definition of liberal education.

Seen in this way liberal education is not a cluster of courses “a mile wide and an inch deep,” the opposite of the “in depth” learning offered in the major. It’s a false dichotomy to equate it with breadth, and specialized work in the major with depth. Increasingly liberal education is being understood as a systematic progression toward ambitious cognitive and personal goals such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, effectiveness in written and oral expression, global awareness, etc. The list of goals will vary from institution to institution but when liberal education is understood as involving such goals, courses in the major need to pull their weight. This entails, as participants in the “disciplines” project are demonstrating, tough questioning about what each field does best—and how it can do it better. The reports from the disciplines in this Teagle project will be available fall 2008.

Fresh Thinking

We have high expectations that the “Disciplines” project will stimulate fresh thinking about undergraduate education. We expect the White Papers, all of which are available at www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/publications.aspx produced to complement those now emerging from our other Fresh Thinking Working Groups. The reports already available on our website illuminate many central topics in higher education, from how to increase the success of minority students in college to the relationship of faculty research and student learning. In addition, the Social Science Research Council has now followed up on the issues raised by our inquiries into the religious engagement of today’s students by developing an online guide and webforum entitled *The Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates* which you can find at programs.ssrc.org/religion/re . Important new reports will soon be added to this list.

These White Papers make our website an increasingly rich and broadly consulted resource for fresh thinking about liberal education. Personally I am especially interested in the results that will emerge from a collaboration with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching on the business major

and liberal education. There's no larger major in the country than that, and, perhaps, no greater opportunity for extending liberal education.

III. Putting Teagle Knowledge to Work

Inferences

As we meet with faculty and administrators and read studies and reports from Teagle projects, we are starting to draw certain inferences about improving student learning. They can be summed up as follows:

- **Clear, ambitious educational goals are the starting point.** American colleges and universities differ widely in mission, resources, tradition, student body and community setting, but everyone benefits when they set ambitious educational goals, and communicate them clearly.
- **Evidence works.** Every college and university that is serious about student learning needs evidence to help it reach its goals. Since student learning is a complex phenomenon and hard to measure, it helps to gather several kinds of evidence, over an extended period of time, and to have a regular process to put that evidence to use as it emerges.
- **Transparency is a legitimate demand.** In addition to basic information about an institution, students, parents and others should have access to an easily intelligible summary of conclusions drawn from evidence about student learning and a clear description of how that evidence is being used to improve student learning.
- **Cross institutional comparisons can help.** Although cross institutional comparisons can sometimes be misleading, when properly used they can help faculty and administrators do a better job. They are usually not effective when they are imposed from above or used for high stakes rewards and punishments. But when institutions build levels of mutual trust—e.g., through collaborative relationships—such comparisons can invigorate the process of improving student learning.
- **Autonomy is a condition for creativity.** The ingenious, adaptive uses of evidence to increase student learning that we are seeing seem to bubble up from below, that is from the curiosity and deep concerns that faculty bring to their teaching. To be truly creative in their use of such evidence faculty need elbow room, support, encouragement from above, but they don't need someone in a big office telling them what to do. That makes me think that increased governmental interference is likely to be counterproductive. The responsibility for improvement lies squarely on colleges and universities themselves, and especially on their faculties.
- **Evidence enables systematic improvement.** As fresh approaches are tried out their effectiveness can be assessed so that better results are achieved at each successive iteration through a process of continuous improvements in quality.

Widely applicable principles?

I have stated these six points rather baldly, without many qualifications or escape clauses. They are, at this moment, simply tentative inferences based on what we are learning at the Teagle Foundation. Although they are not especially new or radical, they are certainly controversial.

It has been revealing over the past several months to discuss our Teagle experience with leaders of various national organizations concerned with American higher education. I have asked them, in effect, if our experience (drawn largely from fine but relatively small private colleges) can be generalized into principles that apply to any institution that really wants to improve student learning. Some thoughtful friends give at best cautious assent, or question the wisdom of anything that points toward transparency or comparisons.

Yet perhaps the ideas behind these inferences are the leading edge of changes in the making. Over the next few months, many organizations will be discussing “New Leadership for Student Learning and Assessment,” a statement that parallels in many respects these inferences. Two in particular—the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Council of Higher Education Accreditation—have endorsed the “New Leadership” document and have agreed to make it available on their websites and to discuss it at their 2008 annual meetings. Such a statement emanating from these two organizations reflects an important, though not a new, meeting of minds. Accrediting organizations have for some years been pointing toward such principles, and urging colleges and universities to think and act along these lines, and several associations of colleges and universities, including the AAC&U, have been working long and hard to help their members prepare for the much more demanding accreditations that are now the norm.

Over the next year we will learn much more about the possibility of further improving student learning in American colleges and universities. The healthy debate that is now underway in many quarters can, I believe—if pursued vigorously and imaginatively—create a powerful dynamic for the improvement of student learning in our colleges and universities.

Genuine accountability

The greatest challenge facing those of us involved in or concerned with higher education is to develop *genuine* accountability, that is, accountability based on improved student learning. Approaching higher education along the lines described in this report brings with it several benefits. First and most important, such an approach keeps front and center the needs of *students*. Second, it allows the individual campus to adapt ideas of wide applicability to its own mission, history, demographics and local setting, rather than waiting for requirements to be imposed from above. It is *pro-active* rather than reactive. Third, an approach focused on student learning and based on clear goals, evidence, transparency, comparability, and systematic improvement in quality

adds up to *genuine* accountability, not one of the false kinds often evoked by those who would lay our national ills on the doorstep of higher education, and then through bureaucratic requirements, legislative burdens, and funding restrictions keep it from responding to them.

Better to do the right thing and do it now. At the Teagle Foundation we are glad to help.