



***Trifecta*, or, Three Bets Teagle is Making to Improve Student Learning**

I.

One of the most beloved and valued trustees of the Teagle Foundation, Stephen Weiss, died last spring—a terrible loss for all of us who knew him and depended on his generous help and sound advice. Steve had been crucial in the reinvention of the Teagle Foundation in recent years. He had poured his energy and accumulated wisdom into the work of the Foundation and would clearly have been a worthy successor to John Chalsty when John stepped down as chairman of the Teagle Board in May 2008. (The Foundation is very fortunate that Richard Morrill, Chancellor of the University of Richmond, has agreed to serve as Chair of its Board.

One reason Steve liked the Teagle Foundation so much, I suspect, is that he liked to play the horses. Whenever he could detach himself from his many commitments and causes, he'd head off to Saratoga or another track. At one point, I hear, he won the *Trifecta*, picking the top three horses, win place and show, in a single race, in the right order. It's very hard to do, but, as Steve reminded us with a smile, the rewards are very great as well.

Colleges and universities have to be very careful about risk taking, especially when the establishment of new departments, centers, or tenure appointments is involved. By and large, American higher education gets an A in addition and a C or D in subtraction. At a college, it is often politically too difficult to cut losses and walk away. Foundations, on the other hand, can take risks—carefully and craftily, of course—and can do so with a willingness to help their beneficiaries try something new that might pay off for them, over time, big time. Foundations, in my view, have a responsibility to be “creative deviants,” risk takers when others shy away.

The Teagle Foundation has made at least three such bets in recent years. First, we have bet that American higher education can change for the better, especially in the liberal arts and sciences. Some philanthropic foundations have veered away from supporting higher education in recent years because higher education has time and again sent the same message that freshmen often send to their parents, “All is fine. Don't ask questions. Just send money.” The claim is that things are fine the way they are, that higher education just needs more resources to do even better what they are already doing so well. But “more of same” just doesn't work very well any more. Plenty of people would say, “American colleges and universities are the best in the world.” They may be right, but the question keeps coming up: “How good is good enough?”

We at the Teagle Foundation believe that more can and should be done, and our grant programs have been based on the idea that student learning really can and must be brought to a much higher level.

Second, we have bet that the assessment of student learning and the data generated from those efforts—useful as they can be—can't do the trick all by themselves. Colleges and universities don't have much of a problem these days administering assessment tools and collecting data, but they more often than not come up short *when its time to use the data* to drive improvements in student learning. Data are not routinely incorporated into campus discussions on teaching and learning, and are much too often left to mold in institutional research offices. At Teagle, we are betting that assessment data can inform campus discussions in powerful ways, and that using data can advance student learning.

Third, we are betting that a "continuing process to improve the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning" will pay off. The phrase comes from Derek Bok in his invaluable book, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton University Press, 2005, 332). The easy way to make grants in higher education is to fund promising projects and declare victory when they have been tried once or twice. Everyone knows, however, that innovations are rarely perfected in a single iteration or two. The idea of "continuous quality improvement" has worked well in manufacturing and other sectors of the economy, but it has a banal or foreign sound when it turns up in talk about education, especially liberal education.

"Try, try again" is the motto, not for failure but for success. It's worth putting money on that line to see if colleges and universities can benefit from systematic change. As we considered a new grant program in this area, there was reason to be skeptical. One college president told us that in his opinion "one or two" institutions might be interested—clearly his own institution would not be among them. But further probing indicated sufficient interest for more than one or two grant proposals. We are now funding over two dozen colleges and universities for "systematic improvement" of undergraduate education: a group of research universities in a joint effort with the Spencer Foundation, and a group of liberal arts colleges that responded to Teagle's Request for Proposals for "systematic improvements in student learning."

In our grantmaking, betting on the *trifecta* is not optional. We have to win in all three if we are to achieve our goal of strengthening undergraduate education. How likely is that? The odds may at first glance seem overwhelming, but on closer examination there is good reason to be optimistic. Systematic improvement, for example, depends on the availability and effective application of educationally appropriate forms of evidence to gauge the impact of each pedagogical innovation. Just a few years ago, there were few such means of assessment, and they tended to be time consuming, expensive, and cumbersome. What's worse, they were often misrepresented as "fill in the bubble tests" and dismissed as the equivalent of the K-12 testing required by the No Child Left Behind act. Such specious objections are less common now and at the same time, new instruments are being developed, and existing ones used with greater sophistication. Good results are emerging, as a recent report from the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) shows. With the help of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and our Foundation, CIC has worked closely with over thirty colleges to use the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to collect data on their students' critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and writing skills, and to use the data to improve learning on their campuses. The CIC report, "Evidence of Learning: Applying the Collegiate Learning Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning in the Liberal Arts College Experience," shows how effective such assessment can be when wisely used. These success stories, we believe, are just the beginning of a transformation that

eventually will benefit students at all but the most backward looking colleges and universities.

Another especially encouraging development is the Wabash National Study which has been developed with some Teagle support by the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College under the skillful leadership of Charles Blaich. Using a battery of assessment instruments focused on key liberal education outcomes, the Study enables dozens of colleges to find out about their students' learning and engagement experiences, and to compare the situation on their campus with those of other peer institutions. Do the results of the Study get buried in a file somewhere? No! Teagle Scholars visit the campuses involved in the Study to present results and help their colleagues find ways to use their data to improve student learning the next time around.

Watching Teagle Scholars in action, witnessing new and better ways of assessing student learning, seeing the very positive response to our "systematic improvement" initiative, and, above all, knowing that positive results are now being achieved on many campuses all make me confident that winning the *trifecta* is not far off. If so, the real winners will be liberal education, higher education, and of course, all the students who will have deeper and richer learning experiences as a result of this work.

II.

There is, to the best of my limited knowledge, no *quadrifecta* in horse racing, and none in our grantmaking either. At the Teagle Foundation, we feel we will be lucky if our three horses—the possibility of real improvement, continuous quality improvement, and more extensive and sophisticated use of evidence—all come in at the head of the pack. But we have made some other equally important bets in the last few years, including one based on the idea that supporting faculty to develop fresh thinking for liberal education can generate some real knowledge and know-how for improving student learning.

Watching the brain light up! One of Teagle's most exciting and recent fresh thinking initiatives is the "Collegia" that are bringing together faculty and researchers from many disciplines to look together at the emerging understanding of the brain, memory, and stereotypes and assumptions that affect student learning. The cognitive sciences, not least neurobiology, have made rapid strides in recent years, thanks in part to fMRI and similar technologies that allow researchers to watch the brain in action. What do these new discoveries mean for student learning? There is no clear, comprehensive answer to that question as yet, but we do know that the human brain keeps developing through the traditional college-going years, and perhaps well beyond, not just adding to existing abilities, but expanding its capacities and developing its functions in new ways. (A bibliography of some recent work in this area is available on our website at <http://www.teagle.org/learning/report/CogAB.aspx>).

While it may be premature to draw definitive conclusions, the new work raises such interesting questions that the Foundation has been eager to encourage new inquiries about its implications. We cannot fund highly expensive basic research in these areas—others are already doing that—but we have found that modest funds can stimulate new, rich dialogues about student learning. The Collegia range from seminars run by consortia of liberal arts

colleges for faculty at their member institutions to projects that bridge divides at research universities. The Great Lakes College Association, for example, will design and pilot new and different pedagogical approaches that are informed by recent research findings in neuroscience and neuropsychology, cognitive psychology, and social / cultural psychology. At Yale, distinguished scholar of language and literature Michael Holquist is developing a collaboration with the Haskins Laboratory to examine reading difficulties among late adolescents from a range of disciplinary perspectives (including those the humanities, and natural and social sciences), and to assess the impact of reading on the many other aptitudes required for a liberal education.

From good ideas to best practices: Developing promising new ideas to advance student learning is only the first step. They need to be tried out and evaluated in a wide range of settings so that they can become a part of the standard operating procedure of college education. We are betting, then, that it is worth putting extra time and resources into helping fresh thinking become best practice. Donna Heiland's recent essay, "Fresh Thinking for Liberal Education: Knowledge and Know-how for Student Learning" does just this as it guides readers to the especially promising findings and results of White Papers produced by Teagle grantees. The essay went out as a special newsletter and within 48 hours, 134 copies of these White Papers were downloaded from our website. Similar publications will follow as we receive White Papers from our "Big Questions" initiative and our work on "The Disciplines and Undergraduate Education." Another way we're trying to encourage the use of the good ideas developed by our grantees is through small but targeted mini-grants programs. A March, 2008 meeting in New York City gathered talented faculty from colleges and universities across the country, all of whom were recommended by their presidents and provosts, to discuss selected White Papers. Some of these faculty members have now applied for mini-grants to use some of the findings on their campuses.

Pushing for success in college: Some of the most rewarding work we support targets the persistent problem of getting young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods to think about, apply to, gain admission to, and attend college. The problem these students face is not only financial, and while I do not want to underestimate their needs and those of their families, colleges and universities—especially in recent years—have been trying valiantly and often successfully to make scholarship aid available to them when they apply. But nurturing the hope of success in college is equally important. That involves the decision to be as ambitious as possible when choosing which schools to apply to, the hard work it takes to develop the study and learning skills needed to excel academically, and the networks of support and encouragement that are necessary to sustain students when the going is rough.

In our College-Community Connections program, we have put our money on the good and successful college preparatory work being done by community-based organizations in New York City, and on the idea that partnerships between these organizations and institutions of higher education can not only help students get to college, but to succeed once there. Encouraging and supporting such partnerships is not exactly a new model, but we like to think that our central focus on academic programming anchored in the liberal arts and sciences, and on bringing together these talented young people with college faculty in the same classroom, are much needed refinements.

An evaluation of College-Community Connections was positive and encouraging, and we have renewed our commitment to the program. The real test, however, is still ahead. The mark

of success, we believe, is not the number of students admitted to college (though that is certainly one of our benchmarks), but the levels of their learning and engagement, especially at selective and demanding colleges. That is a high bar to clear, but, again, we are finding reasons to be optimistic.

III.

New leadership for student learning and accountability: It is exciting and heartening to see the ways in which colleges and universities are responding to new opportunities and challenges. Of course there is nay saying and foot dragging in some quarters, but we have been heartened by the response we've received when our grant programs have pointed to new possibilities. Institutions, large and small, prestigious and less prestigious, have reacted with imagination and often, matching funds and in-kind contributions. More importantly, individuals have stepped forward to provide leadership, even when there is little direct financial reward for them. That is evident whether the issue is the steady improvement of programs through successive iterations time after time, exciting new research in cognitive studies, or the challenging situation of talented young people in difficult circumstances.

At the national level, associations of colleges and universities, accreditors, foundations, and other organizations have recognized the importance of pro-active, imaginative leadership, especially at a time when rising costs and growing global competition put new pressures on American higher education. They realize that self-congratulation and "more of same" is an invitation for governmental intervention and regulation, potentially stifling the flexibility and creativity that has accounted for so much of the distinctive strength of American higher education. Such intervention often takes the form of demands for greater "accountability."

These national leaders have, with help from the Teagle Foundation, worked hard to develop educationally valid forms of accountability, meaning accountability based on (measurable?) improvements in student learning. A powerful statement, *New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability*, was developed over the summer of 2007 and presented for discussion at the meetings of the Council of Independent Colleges, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and the Council of Higher Education Accreditation in early 2008. Since these organizations, along with others that have also distributed the statement to their members, include almost every accredited four-year institution in the country, the statement is receiving wide attention. It is not another high-minded exhortation, applauded at the outset and soon forgotten. It emerged from difficult conversations and slow consensus building. It consists, moreover, of two lists, one of principles that can help colleges and universities strengthen student learning, and the other of specific actions that need to be taken over the next few years. This bold statement is a far cry from the complacent whimpering still heard in some quarters: "Everything is fine; we just need more money." The challenge now is to do what many of our grant recipients have been doing for a long time—using limited resources to achieve maximum benefits in the life and learning of their students. It is a joy to be able to help colleges and universities do just that!

W. Robert Connor
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