

TEAGLE AWARDS FOR SYSTEMATIC IMPROVEMENT IN STUDENT LEARNING

Request for Proposals from Undergraduate Institutions in the Liberal Arts and Sciences

October 2008

The Teagle Foundation, recognizing the importance of systematic, iterative improvement in student engagement and learning in the liberal arts and sciences, aims to support ten to fifteen collaborative projects for the systematic improvement of student learning. The maximum award is \$150,000 over four years.

BACKGROUND: In his book *Our Underachieving Colleges*, Derek Bok suggested that foundations could render a great service by supporting a process of successive improvement in colleges and universities:

... Foundations could give further impetus for change by funding exemplary efforts by colleges to install a systematic process for evaluating educational progress, identifying problems, and experimenting with potential improvements. In the past, outside sources have periodically supported particular innovations, such as new uses of the Internet.... Helpful as such assistance can be, it is very different from what is proposed here. Instead of financing specific innovations, foundations would contribute to the creation of a continuing *process* to improve the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning.... (p. 332)

In effect, Bok is urging foundations and others to encourage colleges to become genuine “learning communities,” assessing progress toward ambitious goals as successive improvements are made. The Teagle Foundation believes that the process Bok envisions can significantly strengthen student learning in the liberal arts and sciences in institutions primarily devoted to undergraduate education in these fields. Any such process requires systematic assessment not as an end in itself but as part of an iterative process for the improvement of student engagement and learning. While we do not expect that all applicants will be ready to implement such a process throughout their institution, we are looking for ambitious, imaginative projects that can significantly increase undergraduates’ cognitive development in the liberal arts and sciences.

THE FOUNDATION’S GOALS:

1. To develop models of assessment followed by intervention and re-assessment—in other words, processes of systematic improvement—that demonstrate gains in student engagement and learning over time. We presume that these will extend or complement assessment efforts already in place on campuses to achieve significantly higher levels of excellence.
2. To encourage the habit of using evidence to achieve *systematic* improvements in student learning.
3. To produce and disseminate knowledge about how colleges can best implement such processes on their campuses.

ELIGIBILITY: These grants are intended to help four-year colleges with a strong commitment to and record of success in liberal education achieve important and well-formulated educational goals. We may in exceptional cases consider applications from universities and organizations that work with colleges on improving undergraduate education in the liberal arts and sciences.

Strong preference will be given to colleges working in collaboration with peer institutions. Since we have found that institutions greatly benefit by sharing ideas and information with peer institutions, we encourage institutions to identify at least one and no more than four suitable partners to share in the work. Such collaborations, we have found, are most likely to succeed when the participants focus on the same area and use means of assessment that allow for cross-institutional comparison.

We seek a wide variety of ambitious and imaginative projects grounded in rigorous and systematic evaluation. While we welcome proposals that integrate such systematic improvement into institution-wide planning, projects may focus on any area in which evidence suggests that student engagement and learning can significantly be improved through systematic and iterative processes.

Successful applicants will already have developed some expertise in the use of assessment and have in place a clear leadership structure responsible for advancing such work.

The maximum grant is \$150,000, typically over three or four years.

LEADERSHIP: We look for strong faculty participation and leadership as well as clear statements of commitment from presidents and other senior academic leaders. The c.v. of the principal investigator(s), a description of the involvement of other faculty and staff, and a presidential statement of support are all essential.

RESOURCES: The Teagle Foundation's website (www.teaglefoundation.org) provides bibliographical and other resources on student learning, assessment, learning organizations, and other relevant topics.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLES:

1) Faculty and administrative leaders at nearby peer institutions Handel College, Haydn College, and Mendelssohn University have for several years discussed—sometimes with each other but mostly on their own—the idea of fostering an educational environment that makes possible the systematic improvement of student learning. All three institutions “do assessment,” that is, they participate in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, as well as administer a number of assessment tools on their campuses, but they have not been able to take the next step of putting their data to work in ways that make possible the achievement of demonstrable improvements in student learning. Teagle funding, they all realize, can change this. In preparing their proposal, the institutions identify two common obstacles that have impeded such progress: the lack of a strong infrastructure for such work, and the difficulties of using college-wide assessment results in departmental planning. The proposal maps out opportunities for sustained discussion across the campuses about these impediments and points to promising ways around them. While none of the campuses is in a position to hire a full time “director of educational improvement,” their provosts appoint new faculty committees to provide ongoing leadership for such work. In addition, visiting consultants are identified who can help departments on the three campuses “drill down” and thereby use existing evidence to guide curricular and instructional changes. After much discussion of how to interpret the evidence available to them, administrators, faculty and consultants agree that they show their students to be less accomplished than they should be as researchers, writers, and critical thinkers. A presentation of these findings at a faculty meeting causes chairs of some leading departments on campus to share these concerns, and ultimately, to work with their departments to institute changes in mid-level courses so that independent research is required of students at an earlier stage in their education, as well as to introduce new forms of “Capstone Experiences” in the senior year. As these innovations are

tried out and then carefully evaluated and compared, revisions are made, resulting in significant gains in student engagement and learning. The campuses host a conference at the end of the grant period to share their experiences and the results of their work, with each other and with other peer institutions in the region.

2) An accreditation report recently praised Carlsberg College for its high academic quality but urged it to develop more systematic ways of improving the personal and learning growth its students achieve. When it plans to return to the campus in a few years, the accrediting organization indicates it expects solid evidence that such a process is in place and producing results. The comments lead to vigorous, sometimes acrimonious, discussions both in faculty meetings and at the Board level. Finally, it is decided to expand the means of assessment used on campus and to integrate the information gained thereby into the college's strategic planning process focused on educational goals. In looking for examples of institutions that had succeeded in similar efforts, the college finds that its old rival Tivoli College has been working on exactly such a project. Football turns out to be no impediment to collaboration between these two colleges. Each college develops a task force that includes faculty members, the director of institutional research, finance officers, student life professionals and senior administrators. A joint steering committee helps each institution develop its own planning processes while benefiting from the ideas and expertise of the other institution. Both plans use the idea of "continual improvement" although in rather different ways. As the two strategic plans are approved and implemented, useful comparisons continue to be made, and as results are studied, it emerges that certain practices really seem to work, while others are less effective. After careful comparison over several years, the colleges make a joint presentation about what they have learned at a meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and their discussion of best practices, published in a report in the journal *Change*, is widely used by colleges in their design of strategic plans.

THE FOUNDATION'S EVALUATION CRITERIA will include:

- Plans for thoughtful and substantive collaboration among institutions on areas of mutual concern.
- The ambition and imagination shown in the approach to important, specific, and clearly stated educational goal(s).
- Record of assessment activities on campus and evidence of the value of these activities for your ongoing work.
- A rigorous and systematic means of assessing progress toward that goal.
- Good faculty leadership and a strong commitment from the institutions' presidents and senior academic leadership.
- An effective plan for disseminating the knowledge gained in the project.

APPLICATION PROCESS: To respond to this RFP, please send a pre-proposal of 250-500 words describing the general design of your project to proposals@teaglefoundation.org no later than **Friday, January 16, 2009**. After the Foundation has had the opportunity to review your pre-proposal, we will let you know (by e-mail) whether or not you will be invited to submit a full proposal. If the Foundation has suggestions that may be helpful in developing the proposal, we may follow up with further e-mail or phone exchanges.

Full proposals are due on **Monday, March 30, 2009** and must include:

1. A cover sheet which includes:

- The name of the primary contact person for the collaborative, his or her mailing address, e-mail address and phone number;
 - The project title and a one-paragraph project summary that we can post on our website if the project is funded;
 - The project's start and end dates;
 - The amount requested and total project cost (see budget guidelines below).
2. A 5-7 page narrative describing the project: the area and means of assessment to be undertaken, the work plan, the project's importance to the institutions involved, the potential implications for liberal education, and the criteria that will be used for judging its success.
 3. A budget as described below.
 4. A timeline of project activities.
 5. Indicators of faculty participation:
 - The names and contact information of the primary contact person for each campus in the collaborative;
 - A list of other faculty members from each of the participating colleges who are committing themselves to work on this project;
 - A c.v. and brief letter of commitment from the primary contact person and faculty members.
 6. Letters from presidents and senior academic officers:
 - A letter from the president of the campus administering the grant, endorsing the project and speaking to his or her willingness to see the grant housed on campus;
 - Letters of endorsement from the presidents and senior academic officers of all other colleges participating in the collaborative.

Budget: We expect to make grants of \$150,000 payable over three or four years.

Funds may be used for all direct, but no indirect, costs of the program. Appropriate expenses include costs of using assessment instruments, travel and meeting expenses, meals for working dinners or similar occasions, office and research materials and assistance, reasonable honoraria or fees for visiting experts or consultants, stipends for participating faculty, expenses related to the preparation and dissemination of reports on results achieved, etc. A modest charge may be included for release time of the person or persons in charge of the project and for support staff.

The budget should be based on July 1 – June 30 operating years. A one to two page sheet should suffice.

Institutional cost sharing should be shown whenever possible, including both direct and indirect costs borne by the participating campuses.

Drafts: Foundation staff will read drafts of proposals on request, if time permits and if submitted by Monday, March 9, 2009.

Final Submission: An electronic copy of the final proposal should be sent to proposals@teaglefoundation.org by **Monday, March 30, 2009**. All proposal materials should be consolidated into a *single* PDF file.

In addition, one hard copy of the final proposal should be mailed to

The Teagle Foundation
10 Rockefeller Plaza, Room 920
New York, NY 10020-1903

BOARD ACTION AND NOTIFICATION: The Foundation's Board will act on these proposals at its May, 2009 meeting. Notification of Board action will be released shortly thereafter, in late May or early June, 2009.

PAYMENTS AND REPORTS: The Foundation will release first payments on receipt of signed award letters. Subsequent funds will be released on receipt and successful review of interim reports.

Interim narrative and financial reports are typically due by June 15th of each grant year. Financial reports should follow the format of the budget submitted with the original proposal.

A brief final narrative report describing how the collaborative functioned, what proved especially productive or problematic, prospects for the future, etc., will be due one month after the project's completion date. The Foundation also requires a final financial report that details receipt and spending of all funds received, presented in a form consistent with that of the original proposal.

Finally, we believe that successful collaboratives will have an important story to tell to other institutions in higher education and to a wider public that is increasingly concerned with accountability, student learning outcomes, and what constitutes effective teaching and learning. We therefore also require a short (under 10 pages) narrative written with these audiences in mind, that will present best practices, lessons learned, and important data from the project.