What Works and What Matters in Student Learning?

An Introduction from Richard L. Morrill, Teagle Foundation President

During the past eight years, the Teagle Foundation has supported dozens of collaborations among faculty members from different colleges and universities to explore the various methods of assessment to improve student learning. Both in relation and in parallel to these grants, the Foundation has also funded programs, projects and action research on student learning sponsored by national and regional educational associations and consortia.

The Foundation’s work has been shaped around a series of meetings with prospective and current grant recipients to learn about issues as they are understood on campus, to share insights and experience among researchers and college teachers and administrators, to communicate findings and to explore priorities in grant making. Although the focus on student learning and approaches to assessment continue to evolve quite rapidly, a number of issues have coalesced to the point that it is useful to take stock of some of the possibilities and challenges, and agreements and disagreements that have emerged. In effect we want to ask “what works”—what leads to success and effectiveness—both in assessment and in student learning. It draws us toward the idea of “best practices” that should be highlighted and captured at this stage of progress.

Focusing on “best practices” requires us as well to situate the work in terms of its own assumptions and wider possibilities. The sharp educational focus on the inner dynamics of student learning, as opposed to the transfer of information by teachers as experts, represents a gradual Copernican turn in the mission of higher education. The shift has been fundamental and widespread but slow to play out systematically in the ways we think about, put together and evaluate undergraduate programs of study in American higher education. We are in the midst of discovering new conceptual and practical benchmarks for student learning as a process of formation and transformation regarding (1) how students learn (through interactive, active and engaged forms of learning, study of diverse ideas and cultures, high impact practices like student research, experiential learning, new uses of technology, immersion in other cultures, collaboration, and through motivational teaching that connects with students, and includes challenging expectations, extensive student time on task, and continual evaluation and feedback), and (2) what students learn (in the content of substantive knowledge, and the ways knowledge is understood through nuanced interpretations and conceptual frameworks, connected with other knowledge, and used to create meaning in different contexts of personal experience and social responsibility). Through these approaches to knowledge, and never without them, student learning then takes shape as a (3) consequence or outcome of learning through the development of powers of the mind and of the person that are often referred to variously as broad cognitive and personal skills, commitments, dispositions, competencies, capacities and capabilities. One can think of them as the lasting, internalized developmental consequences of
learning, or even as learning itself. So it is that many of these capabilities have recently come to be called “outcomes” of education, though the term is too thin and mechanical to capture the powerful and lasting forms of human intellectual and personal capability to which they point and which so tellingly shape human possibility itself. The ability to understand and use language well, to question and to use evidence to construct and defend arguments, to analyze and criticize assumptions, to connect ideas from different contexts, to address and solve an array of intellectual, organizational and social problems, to take the point of view of others, to unfailingly respect persons and relate ethically and effectively to them, to love learning itself, and to form a resilient sense of identity and purpose, are all part of the forms of intellectual and personal development to which the best methods of teaching and learning and their assessment intend to be directed.

As a natural consequence of exploring the contours of student learning, we also want to examine “what matters in student learning” by selectively examining the aims, the form and the content of liberal education. The increasing public preoccupation with professional and vocational studies coupled with the steady growth in specialization in academic fields has challenged the commitment to broad and integrated programs of study in the arts and sciences, especially in the humanities. As the data suggest, a majority of students major in a career-related field, with business the choice of 21% of undergraduates, while 5% major in literature and 3% in history.\(^1\) The humanities are widely studied in general education programs, but with notable exceptions in a number of institutions, humanities courses are chosen from a jumble of options to meet a distribution requirement with no clear connection to anything else the student is studying. The course may well be a small seminar on a specialized topic, or the broad introduction to a major that is taught in a lecture hall with hundreds of students, where much of the learning is passive. Taken together with continuing economic stagnation in the wider society and sharply reduced university budgets, many humanities and other subjects have undergone a series of sharp cuts. Reflecting these tough realities, the number of graduate students in the humanities continues to decline, and by factors of 50% to 70% in some fields in a number of large departments.\(^2\)

These trends raise all sorts of questions and challenges about “what matters” in undergraduate education. The questions reach the purpose of liberal education to foster both a breadth and depth of knowledge and broad cognitive abilities, to educate for democratic responsibility and to explore existential questions of meaning and value. By keeping the issues of the content of the curriculum linked to a focus on teaching and learning we have a better chance to set clear goals and find satisfying and integrative approaches concerning both “what matters”

---

and “what works” in liberal education. As we examine the humanities, we do so in the context of seeing how they do or could exemplify the most important principles and practices in successful student learning, even as they simultaneously focus on their own proper subject matters. The humanities typically address the ways humans use words, ideas, texts, records, documents, narratives, artifacts, sounds, symbols and images to express, to enjoy and to make sense of the intricacies of their experience and to pursue the larger questions of human dignity and purpose as finite and flawed beings. In effect, we are asking how the humanities equip students to live more examined and informed, as well as fuller and more effective lives, and how higher education and the public can have confidence that these goals are being conscientiously and successfully pursued. In this meeting, we have chosen to explore the broad field of the humanities, though at other times and in other contexts we could choose to explore the natural sciences, the social sciences or a critical capability like quantitative reasoning. When the focus is on student learning, the subject matters distinctly and decisively, though many of the wider educational issues remain the same.
What Works and What Matters in Student Learning?
Teagle Foundation Meeting / June 7-9, 2012
New York Marriott East Side Hotel – Morgan Rooms

Program

Thursday, June 7

5:00 Reception
6:00 Dinner
7:15 Welcome and Introduction, Richard Morrill

Opening Address
Greater Expectations for Student Learning
Richard Arum, Professor of Sociology & Education, New York University

Do we know enough about student learning through current methods of assessment to improve it? What is our level of confidence that learning can be improved by setting greater expectations for students, by studying certain subjects, by influencing campus culture or by methods of teaching and learning? How are different forms and levels of student learning related to the experiences of students after they graduate?

Friday, June 8

7:30-8:30 Breakfast

What Works in Student Learning and Assessment: A Marketplace of Ideas

Leader, Marc Chun
Hewlett Foundation, Education Program Officer

8:30-8:45 Introduction

To keep our session lively and interactive, we have shamelessly stolen a common metaphor for the university (and the title of a recent book by Louis Menand) and designed our session to be a marketplace of ideas. We have asked eight of our participants to take the lead in making 6 minute (rigidly prescribed and enforced) presentations backed up by PowerPoint slides or a poster on different topics that have had some currency in recent approaches to assessing and improving student learning. The goals in each case will be to offer bullet-point statements in the form of reasoned advocacy about what we know or have evidence to believe about the topic, and
to suggest what it tells us we could or should do in assessment, or how the ideas and practices have improved or could improve student learning.

After the conclusion of the presentations, everyone will then all have a chance to interact for 50 minutes with the presenters, to ask questions, to build on the approach, to suggest issues or problems, and to cite alternative experiences and research. Each of the presenters will be at a table, armed with their PowerPoint slides as handouts, or posters, or flipcharts, or computers, or iPads to support their presentation and to respond to the questions and comments of the participants. One respondent also has been asked to stay with the presenter and both to participate in the discussion and to record what in that person’s judgment are the most important issues raised in the marketplace, producing a brief “state of the market” report for each topic. The respondents will ask participants to suggest the ideas or practices that they would like to take home with them to try on their campuses, which can be offered in the wrap-up session either by the presenter or the participant.

In the next and final session, the respondents will then have 5 minutes to summarize their reports after which the presenters and the marketplace participants will have another 5 minutes to discuss the issues and suggest changes to the report. These three sets of tasks create the following schedule:

8:45-9:45   Topics and Issues

(1) What accounts for the wide differences in effective student learning between and within institutions? What do these variations tell us about the characteristics that lead to success in student learning?

Charles Blaich, Presenter
*Director, Center of Inquiry and the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium, Wabash College*

Paul Sotherland, Respondent
*Associate Provost for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, Kalamazoo College*

(2) How can institutions use student surveys based on self-reports, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) (and their derivatives), to improve student learning?

John Pryor, Presenter
*Director, Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles*
Mary Hinton, Respondent
Vice President for Planning and Assessment, Mount St. Mary College

(3) How can insights and practices derived from cognitive science improve student learning?

Richard A. Detweiler, Presenter
President, Great Lakes Colleges Association

G. Christian Jernstedt, Respondent
Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences and
Director, Center for Educational Outcomes, Dartmouth College

(4) How can rubrics be used to define learning goals and improve performance?

Jenny Bergeron, Presenter
Director, Educational Research and Assessment in the Arts and Sciences, Harvard University

Daniel J. Bernstein, Respondent
Professor of Psychology and
Director, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Kansas

(5) How do institutional cultures and leadership make a difference in student learning?

Jillian Kinzie, Presenter
Associate Director, Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement Institute

David Paris, Respondent
Executive Director, New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability

(6) What difference do high impact practices make in student learning?

Alexander C. McCormick, Presenter
Director, National Survey of Student Engagement and
Associate Professor, Indiana University School of Education

Richard Light, Respondent
Walter H. Gale Professor of Education, Harvard University and
Board Member, Teagle Foundation
(7) How can instruments that measure broad cognitive powers like the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) be used to improve student learning?

Josipa Roksa, Presenter
Associate Professor of Sociology and Education, University of Virginia

Harold V. Hartley III, Respondent
Senior Vice President, Council of Independent Colleges

(8) How can electronic portfolios be used to assess and improve student learning?

Terrell Rhodes, Presenter
Vice President for the Office of Quality, Curriculum and Assessment, Association of American Colleges and Universities

J. Elizabeth Clark, Respondent
Professor of English, LaGuardia Community College

9:45-10:45 The Exchange of Ideas, Arguments and Evidence

The participants move through the marketplace and shop by asking questions and offering ideas, experience and critiques to the Presenters and Respondents, who will create a short list of the issues that represent “state of the market” conclusions.

10:45-11:00 Break

11:00-12:30 The State of the Market

Reports from the respondents and brief responses from the presenters and questions and comments from marketplace participants, with the aim to reach the “takeaways” about the state of each issue and its limits and possibilities to assess the various components of liberal education, especially in different areas of the curriculum such as general education, majors, and the wider campus experience. The respondents can suggest several of the ideas for use on campus that were suggested, or ask participants to do so. 10 minutes for each topic.

12:30-1:30 Lunch

2:00-3:15 What Matters in Student Learning in Liberal Education
Human Capabilities and Liberal Education
Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, University of Chicago

Introduction: W. Robert Connor, Senior Advisor, Teagle Foundation

Respondents:
Elisabeth Camp, Professor of Philosophy, University of Pennsylvania
Elizabeth Minnich, Senior Scholar, Association of American Colleges & Universities

Does the capabilities approach to human development offer new possibilities for the way we design, implement and assess programs of general and liberal education, from the sciences to the humanities? Can it overcome the usual gaps between knowing, feeling and doing as aspects of learning, and the typical tension between knowledge of content and the development of capacities as the goals of liberal education?

3:15-3:30 Break

3:30-4:45 What Matters in Teaching and Learning in the Humanities: Crisis or Opportunity?

Andrew Delbanco, Chair, What are the Humanities For?
Mendelson Family Professor of American Studies, Columbia University;
Board Member, Teagle Foundation

The challenges of liberal education in the humanities take on a special urgency in the contemporary world. Challenged by academic specialization on one side and vocationalism on the other, caught between minimalist and maximalist versions of truth, the humanities are declining in influence and centrality—even as countless commissions repeatedly affirm their importance. When it comes to teaching and learning in the humanities, what matters most? 15 minute presentations and 30 minutes for discussion.

“We Scholars, Those Students”
Russell Berman, Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities, Stanford University

“Education for Democracy and the Humanities”
Carol Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges & Universities

“The Digital Humanities: Student Learning and the New Technologies”
Katherine Rowe, Chair and Professor of English, Bryn Mawr College
5:45-7:30 Drinks and Buffet Dinner

Saturday, June 9

7:30-8:30 Breakfast

8:30-10:00 Representative Programs in the Humanities

Where does the program fit in the curriculum or the co-curriculum? What are its goals for student learning? Are they, for instance, focused on acquiring integrative knowledge, the methods of the disciplines, broad cognitive abilities, or dispositions towards curiosity and a love of learning? Do the goals include demonstrating how humanities disciplines can address the larger meaning and complexities of the human condition, and the intellectual and ethical resources required for democratic citizenship? How are those goals reached in terms of what and how topics are studied—what issues and texts, methods of teaching, assignments, tasks and experiences are central to the goals? Especially in terms of the methods of assessment reviewed at this meeting, what evidence do we have that students are reaching the goals we set for them?

Handouts and materials will be provided by the panelists. 15 minutes for each presentation, and 30 minutes for discussion.

Donna Heiland, Chair
Vice President, Teagle Foundation

“The Columbia University Core in the Humanities”
Roosevelt Montas, Director, Center for the Core Curriculum, Columbia University

“The Study of Literature and The English Major at Stanford”
Jennifer Summit, Professor of English, Stanford University

“The Intellectual and Ethical Resources Required for Citizenship”
Rev. Richard Ryscavage, S.J. Director of The Center for Faith and Public Life and Director of the Office of Service Learning, Professor of Sociology and International Studies, Fairfield University

“The Barnard Course: Reacting to the Past”
Judith Shapiro, Professor of Anthropology and President Emerita, Barnard College; Board Member, Teagle Foundation

10:00-10:15 Break

10:15-11:00 Roundtables: Ideas for the Future (Participants in groups of 6-7 at each table)
Anne Bezbatchenko, Chair
*Program Officer, Teagle Foundation*

If Teagle were to pursue an initiative around student learning in the humanities, what would you want the Foundation to hear?

- Which courses or programs presented appear to exemplify best practices of student learning in the humanities? What might you want to change? What other programs and courses in your knowledge—whether in general education, or in a capstone course, or in other forms—would you suggest as a good example of success, innovation, or of effective learning and assessment practices in the humanities?
- How might collaborations among a small or large number of humanities programs in different institutions strengthen teaching and learning in the humanities and provide influential models of good practice?
- What other approaches to improving student learning in the humanities would you suggest?

**11:00-11:30 Closing: Student Learning and the Work of the Teagle Foundation**

Richard Morrill
*President, Teagle Foundation*