What Works for Student Learning?

Insights from the Teagle Foundation’s National Convening

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8/02/2012
Setting the Context for Questions about Student Learning

In June 2012, the Teagle Foundation brought together national experts to explore questions about student learning in higher education at a convening titled, “What Works and What Matters in Student Learning” (June 7-10, 2012). Specifically, the meeting addressed two primary questions: What do we currently know about how and how much students are learning? And what do we know about the ways in which we can improve gains in learning? Participants were scholars, practitioners, and researchers whose work at the national and campus levels provided a range of insights and perspectives regarding current challenges and promising practices in higher education.

Discussions about student learning are shaped by several issues affecting colleges and universities which have dramatically affected learning experiences for college students. One issue is accreditation and accountability. Another is the culture shifts that are reshaping higher education (i.e. changes in faculty hiring, diversifying student populations, transfer rates). A third issue is changes in technology that have altered the ways in which students engage in learning (i.e. online learning, web 2.0 tools, social media). A final issue—and one that served as the catalyst for the “What Works and What Matters in Student Learning” convening—is responding to the following question: how much are students actually learning at colleges and universities?

The opening discussion, led by Richard Arum, co-author of Academically Adrift (Arum & Roksa 2011), focused on the authors’ findings from a multi-institutional analysis of student learning gains in writing, critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving skills. Arum and Roksa found that students made minimal gains in learning on these outcomes between the time they entered college and their sophomore year, averaging about a seven percent increase over this period. Student gains were also found to vary by institutional type and student demographic characteristics, such as their race and parents’ educational attainment. Additionally, the authors cite findings from other research to support the claim that students make few, if any, learning gains during college. A recently published study that reviews multiple sources of national data on student learning tells a similarly troubling story of student progress over time (Finley 2012)¹.

Although the findings on student learning are unsettling by themselves, Arum and Roksa’s analysis also reveals the degree to which institutional practices neither support nor encourage learning gains. In a sample of more than 2,000 students, the majority did not have a course in the last semester that required them to write a paper of substantial length (20+ pages) or that required them to read 40 or more pages. Students also reported spending far fewer than the recommended number of hours studying and had limited opportunities for interaction with faculty. Given this lack of intentionality by colleges and universities to foster rigorous learning experiences and opportunities, it is not surprising that learning gains are weak.

Paradoxically, at the same time that empirical studies paint a grim picture of student progress in learning, higher education faculty and professionals know more than ever about what really matters to produce deep, transformative learning experiences for students. To capture this knowledge, much of the convening was dedicated to presentations by scholars and practitioners on a variety of national research findings and campus practices. Called a “marketplace of ideas,” these presentations and resulting discussions explored the ways in which higher education can build upon current work to promote learning gains. Three essential practices emerged from the “marketplace” that help to inform institutional change processes and strategies for the improvement of student learning.

Promising Practices for Improving Student Learning

1. **Develop an Organizational Culture that Makes Student Learning a Priority and Emphasizes Community Building in Support of that Commitment.**

First and foremost, student learning improves when learning becomes a central point of commitment for institutional change. The most effective organizational change for campuses is the development of communities of practice among faculty, staff, and administrators in the context of student learning. These communities are collaborative, interdependent, interdisciplinary, and have shared goals. Jillian Kinzie, Associate Director at Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research, presented evidence from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicating that institutions with high marks on student engagement over time share several practices of community building. These institutions, such as the University of Kansas, Wofford College, and California State University-Monterey Bay\(^2\) had a coherent and persistent focus on student learning, guided by a clear mission statement and an unwavering commitment by faculty and administrators to engage students and to establish high standards for learning. These campuses also demonstrated what Kinzie referred to as a “positive restlessness” – an ongoing cycle of reflection, review, and dialogue to improve learning. This restlessness was driven by faculty, whose collaboration with institutional leadership enabled risk-taking, and allowed people to learn from failures. Similarly, Charlie Blaich, director of Wabash College’s Center of Inquiry, noted that research has shown that variations in success within and across institutions can be largely attributed to one key factor: faculty. At the most effective institutions, faculty demonstrated a personal commitment to helping students learn, guiding their reflection, and devoting time to achieving these goals. Importantly, these faculty also demonstrated a commitment to working collaboratively with their colleagues to understand and develop processes for the development of learning across the curriculum and within departments.

2. **Enable Learning-Centered Environments that Foster Student Learning**

The scholarship on the relationship between cognitive development and learning, presented by Richard Detweiler, President of Great Lakes Colleges Association, illuminated how learning

\(^2\) See [http://nsse.iub.edu/_/?cid=113](http://nsse.iub.edu/_/?cid=113) for additional institutions cited by NSSE as part of Project DEEP.
Environments need to be constructed in order to maximize learning gains. For example, students need to feel empowered to construct knowledge (e.g. connect and synthesize ideas to create new meanings), not just receive it (e.g. rote memorization of facts, theories or text). They also need to be emotionally and personally engaged in what they are learning, rather than passive recipients of disciplinary content. As John Dewey noted, learning is “associative;” learners must develop relationships with each other, be encouraged to collaborate and to integrate their lived experiences into their learning. Research from NSSE presented by Alex McCormick echoed these points by highlighting the degree to which certain learning practices, often labeled as “high impact practices,” demonstrate remarkable positive effects on student learning outcomes when implemented well. These practices (e.g. service-learning experiences, first year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, and capstone experiences) are characterized by high levels of interaction with faculty and peers, significant time on task intended to foster skill building, opportunities to engage with diverse people and perspectives, and assignments that engage higher-order thinking skills. Emerging evidence further suggests that when students experience more than one of these practices, the impact on learning can be even greater. Notably, what matters most in developing effective environments for student learning is the practice of being intentional in establishing clear learning goals and meaningful assignments that enable students to create and integrate knowledge.

3. Develop Better and more Meaningful Assessments to Understand Student Learning

In Academically Adrift, Arum and Roksa provide a portrait of what is not working with regard to student learning. But their findings come with caveats. The researchers discuss early in the book that their analysis is based upon a single measurement of learning (the Collegiate Learning Assessment, CLA) that—like any assessment tool—possesses certain limitations in both its accuracy and scope of measurement. The CLA also accounts for only certain learning outcomes (critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and writing), when in reality, student learning encompasses a far wider range of skills and competencies worthy of capturing, such as integrative learning (i.e. application and transfer of knowledge across disciplines, contexts, and experiences), information literacy, quantitative literacy, creative thinking, civic engagement, and ethical reasoning – to name just some. Thus, capturing the full range of student learning requires using both varied assessments and “high impact” experiences. Assessments must be nimble enough to capture learning that occurs in applied and diverse contexts, that is developmental in nature, and that reflects a spectrum of outcomes critical to a twenty-first century education.4

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One of the most widely used forms of assessment is student experience surveys, such as those developed by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and NSSE; such surveys measure student perceptions rather than actual learning outcomes. John Pryor, Director of CIRP, argues that while certain learning outcomes, such as critical thinking, may be held as universally important by colleges and universities, the unique campus context within which students actually learn this skill varies significantly across institutions. Furthermore, not all students will experience the same campus setting in similar ways. In particular, students from traditionally underserved populations (first generation, low-income, transfer, and minority students) are likely to encounter differences in their access to and participation in particular learning experiences. Thus, experience surveys that rely on students’ self-reports are an important means by which to contextualize differences within and across institutional learning environments.

However, capturing a student’s experience is not the same as capturing his or her learning. In combination with insights gained from student experience surveys, it is essential for institutions to use direct assessments of learning based upon demonstrations of student thinking and skill application. Because the learning skills fostered by college and universities, such as critical thinking, integrative learning, and civic engagement, are multifaceted, evaluation of these learning outcomes requires assessments that can convey an outcome’s multidimensionality. For example, competency in writing requires more than doing one thing well, such as application of grammar and syntax. It also requires that a writer understand her audience, convey purpose, and present a viewpoint. Rubrics are useful tools for articulating a range of dimensions within and across learning outcomes. An example of rubrics that capture this dimensionality is those developed through AAC&U’s “VALUE” project. The VALUE rubrics were created by teams of faculty nationwide to enhance institutional-level assessment of learning outcomes and to foster students’ self-assessment of their learning progress.

The utility of rubrics also extends beyond assessment of student learning; rubrics can also enhance pedagogy. Assessment specialist Jennifer Bergeron (Stanford University) has worked with faculty at Stanford to highlight the ways in which rubrics can be used as teaching tools to develop assignments that effectively encourage student thinking and demonstration of learning outcomes. Rubrics can also be used as curricular “diagnostic tools,” whereby gaps in students’ developmental learning can be identified and improved.

Finally, equally important in the assessment of student learning is giving students a way to assemble their work, reflect upon it, and understand their own developmental journey. Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) are a useful and widespread means by which to accomplish these goals. Providing a national perspective on assessment, Terrel Rhodes, Vice President of AAC&U, highlighted the growing

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6 The VALUE rubrics can be found and downloaded at [http://www.aacu.org/value/index.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/value/index.cfm).
use of ePortfolios as resources for learning, assessment, and career development. ePortfolios can also showcase the high standards and commitment of faculty, professional staff, and institutional leadership to improving learning through the intentional collection of work, incorporation of reflection, and connection of assessment with evidence of skill-building and development. Institutions of varying type and size, such as Portland State University, LaGuardia Community College, Clemson University, Florida State University, and St. Olaf College, have integrated ePortfolios across the curriculum to allow students to reflect on their learning and tell their story.

**Closing Thoughts**

What we currently know about student learning should, perhaps more than anything, compel us to learn more. We know from existing evidence that colleges and universities can do more to promote and enhance student learning. We also know a good deal about how they can go about this, most notably from the rich set of practices that have already been implemented at institutions across the country. Understanding what works and what matters in student learning is, in some ways, as simple as looking at the successful practices in place across higher education. But the adoption and scaling of those practices on any one campus takes reflection, intentionality, and persistence. Ironically, these are the same capacities we ask of our students.

Learning-centered change for institutions requires understanding that communities of practice matter. Depth and breadth of student engagement in learning experiences matter, as do varied, meaningful, and reflective practices on the part of faculty. The challenge of institutional change to improve student learning is not due to a lack of understanding of what works – it is a matter of will and action. It is also about finding a balance between constructing learning environments that lead students to learn while still enabling them to chart their own journeys. It is not enough to create one community of practice, a few “high impact learning” experiences, and a few good assessment tools. Plenty of students will find a way to map a course around an institution’s best intentions. An institutional commitment to learning means establishing standards of excellence and engagement pervasive enough to align with any course of study and for every student.